Three years after the birth of my first daughter, I had a dream. It was during one of those rare afternoon naps afforded a mother in grad school, a sleep so intense and yet so close to waking life that the sounds and lights from the surrounding afternoon penetrate and become part of the dream. I was back in my room at the small hospital in Virginia where I had just had an emergency C-section. My husband, Will, was holding my hand—hard-looking serious and relieved and tender all at once. My mother was in my father's arms, crying, which I knew not to take too seriously although it was not a good sign. But my doctor's eyes were bright with tears as well, and that was almost never good.

"Your baby ingested meconium," he began, "which is common enough with babies who are late. We had to suction her lungs, so that seems to be fine. Also, when the doctor made the cut into your uterus, she jumped, and he nicked her ear, so you'll notice a few stitches." He drew a shaky breath and began to cry more openly. "But the most serious thing is that your daughter has all the symptoms of Down syndrome."

At that moment several things happened, in the reality of that day and in the dream, which so far had gone exactly as I remembered it. First, I heard my mother give a loud sob, and I tightened my lips and flicked my eyes with irritation in her direction. Then I grabbed the doctor's hand with my free one and without missing a beat I smiled up at him and said, "Don't worry, Dr. Badillo, we're not going to send her back."

But something was happening in my dream that I had not noticed in the hospital room that day. In the same moment as I was giving my mom the silent order to stop acting like this was some tragedy and reassuring my doctor that Down syndrome was not the end of the world, a scream, shaped like a cobra, hissed and spiraled upward out of my head and collected itself in a series of mechanical clicks and flashing lights into a chambered nautilus hovering over my bed, detached from the scene below. It dragged me up from sleep as it went, and I woke wondering, Where was the scream that day? I remember everything else as if it were happening right now, but I do not remember that scream.

Thinking it through, I realized that I had a name for what was represented in that dream—repression. I had, consciously, experienced relief when the doctor said Down syndrome. I was a teacher, for heaven's sake; I knew about Down syndrome. I actually began almost immediately rehearsing what I knew—not the dehumanizing they're-so-loving-like-angels-straight-from-heaven crap that permeated the public imagination about people with Down's, but the facts. They have differing intelligence potentials, just like normal kids; they are life-long learners, limited only by environment and motivation, and they can be quite high-functioning. Yeah, they're kind of funny looking, but the girls are generally better-looking than the boys, I thought, and their biggest problem seemed to me to be the fact that they were usually born to older parents who didn't inform themselves on best educational practices or the latest fashions. Well-meaning people flooded our room to tell us that God had chosen us because we were special, because he knew we could handle a special challenge. Bosh. But still, I knew from day one that I could do this. My husband and I had the skills, the faith, and the motivation to raise a happy, high-functioning, reasonably cool person. Obviously, I was repressing a lot.

Nonetheless, I was doing what I needed to do—I was constructing a narrative that I could live within. Emily's Down's was a surprise and did not assimilate easily into the story I had always told about myself. I was a smart girl—the smartest, if you believe yearbook polls—so of course I had assumed that my children would be smart as well, that their problems as they negotiated school and friendships and crushes would be familiar to me. I had even chosen a name for my firstborn that reflected my bookish identity—she would be named for L. M. Montgomery's alter ego, Emily Byrd Starr, as both the author and character had been so influential in making me who I imagined myself to be. My intellectual bent had made me a bit of an anthropologist in the land of emotions; my passions were reserved for thinking about and understanding people
from a distance, not losing myself in relationships that might interfere with my larger goals. I had little patience with stupid people, especially girls who played dumb, and I found that particular prejudice followed me into the classroom as a teacher. In fact, I liked theorizing about the strange behavior of that alien we call the child much more than I liked intervening in it or trying to educate or change it. That was why I fled the classroom, why I sought refuge in philosophy and theory even while I remained connected to child culture through their books. Without consciously deciding to, I was becoming a children’s literature scholar. Then, at the end of my master’s program, I became the mother of a girl whose intelligence would be largely emotional rather than intellectual, and I needed a story in which we both would fit—a story that went beyond conscious intellect and explored a world of bodies, unconscious motivations, and unspoken desires.

I found such a story in the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. His work became my narrative compass, orienting me in a space between language and bodies, offering a bridge across the chasm Emily’s birth had opened in my life story. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, he undertook a radical revision of Freudian theory by reading it through the study of linguistics proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Emile Benveniste. Whereas Freud located trauma in the embodied experiences of childhood, Lacan pointed out that we all suffer from the fundamental trauma of becoming a subject in and to a language that fundamentally divorces us from our embodiment. Granted, it is through language that we can have any kind of social existence at all, but it is also through language that we become alienated, compelled to name, represent, and symbolize experience in words that never quite capture that experience in its totality. We are thus separated from what Lacan calls our jouissance (experience of undifferentiated unity and wholeness) and forced to try to refind it in the largely bankrupt experiences of everyday life. Our desires, our body images, and our most intimate experiences are all mediated through the public order of language and culture, which is never adequate to the thing it seeks to represent or avow.

During my master’s program I had taken a children’s literature course and a contemporary theory course in the same semester, and I marveled at how the one made the other more intelligible. Lewis Carroll taught me to understand the arbitrariness and contrariness of signs and the nostalgia for an imaginary language that means what it says as Saussurean linguistics thrust Humpty Dumpty from his wall; J. M. Barrie helped me comprehend Lacan’s innovations on Freud’s biologically grounded narratives as both the theorist and the author sublimated desire into language. I knew that Lacan had much to offer the study of children’s literature, and I knew that my scholarly career lay in that direction. As Emily woke into her distinctive personhood I realized that her behaviors were more intelligible through Lacanian theory as well and that a braid of the three—Lacan, literature, and the body of my child—would constitute a new story through which my life would make sense.

During those first years of Emily’s life I began to think of motherhood as wet work. From the time of her birth it seemed that some bit of one of us was always wet. [The fact that my water broke at home before I went into labor should have been my first indication of a soggy future.] She was in intensive care the first eight days of her life while I dutifully hooked myself to a breast pump every four hours to get things ready for her eventual coming home. The smell, the process, and the product reminded me of the milking parlor on my uncle’s farm; I joked that I let down every time I saw a small appliance. Breastfeeding got off to a rocky start; I always seemed to have more to give than she could take in. That was fortunate, though, because I pumped the extra, and my husband was able to nurse her, too. Holding a syringe tightly against his finger, he gently pressed the plunger so she would be rewarded for sucking and learn to associate skin with food.

Meanwhile, I longed for the dry work of scholarship. I had taken a few years off from school to work and get used to mothering, and I missed the mental challenge of reading and writing. Moreover, I was increasingly insecure in my wet work. Despite my brave protestations of competence, Emily’s presence was a continual challenge to the stories I told myself and others about Down’s. What if, after all, I wasn’t providing the optimal environment for her to reach her potential? In fact, I’d already grown defiant. Who lives up to his or her potential anyway? What kind of unnecessary stress is that, to be working at potential 24/7? Geez.

But I hadn’t given up, either on myself or on her. Lacanian metaphors began to seep out along with my abundant milk as I watched my daughter develop. At first she was our love-a-lump, her low muscle tone forcing her to conform her body to whatever surface held her; she was a Lacanian hommelette, a little person and also an egg spreading out in all directions, not knowing where she ended and her world began. Her nose ran constantly, and I never seemed to have a tissue; she slept through the night from birth, so I woke up soaked from unused milk. We were, as Lacan would say, a missed encounter. But soon we learned each other’s rhythms and became the Lacanian dyad we were supposed to be—the myth of pre-oedipal paradise that needed to be in place so it could be broken. In her therapy sessions she violently rejected dolls
As the uncanny affects they are, her favorite play objects were books. I soon found out why.

At eight months she started using signs. When we interacted with her we always signed the words “more,” “eat,” and “finished.” We knew that her speech would be delayed; we also knew that without speech she would have no access to the world of the symbolic. For Lacan, we have existence in three registers: the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. The most primal is the real, the undifferentiated space that exists outside of language, thought, image, and category. To remain there is not an option. Humans use image and language to apprehend the world; it is our inescapable fate. The register that first trumps the real for the baby is the imaginary—the world she first enters when she realizes that the baby in the mirror is both her and not her, an image over there of her body over here. Emily had that. She watched herself obsessively in the mirrors in the therapy room; she used them to see the boundaries of her body and reach beyond her immediate abilities to attain a new skill. Her reflection affirmed for her the possibility of competence; it enabled her to anticipate the coherent body she would inhabit once the bits and pieces of her experienced body came together and did what she wanted. At least that’s what it looked like to me because that was what Lacan said in his essay on the “mirror stage.”

But the symbolic is where it all happens for the developing child. It is where she learns her place in the world, where she learns about time, and becomes a person with a history and a future. That is what we wanted for Emily, and so we taught her to sign to give her access to that world even if she couldn’t yet make the sounds. I wrote about her first use of those signs in a paper for my linguistic anthropology course. I had learned through reading the work of Pierre Bourdieu that language is an affair of the body before it has any semantic content, and I was watching that happen while I changed my baby’s diaper. Emily, lying on her changing table one day, started moving her hands in very controlled ways, shaping the signs for “more,” “eat,” and “finished” over and over again. She was babbling! She was demonstrating the emptiness of signs, their ritual nature, their dependence on the body, and the arbitrariness with which they exist external to their connection with any mental image.

She was also signifying her intent to enter the world of language. She had accepted the stern terms of the symbolic and assented to the fact that she would need to displace the comforts of a mutely embodied presence where her needs were anticipated and fulfilled with the relative dissatisfactions and pale substitutes for desire that words and symbols offer. She

as asserting her place as a subject of language, subject to language, the social contract that it contained to follow the rules of her culture. There have been times since when she has gone back on her intent. She plays the Down syndrome card, particularly with her doting grandparents and authority figures who would keep her from doing what she wants. She performs little acts of defiance by pretending not to understand, pretending not to be able to speak, so they will answer for her or back off their demands. Her delayed speech offers the luxury of opting out of the stringent demands of the symbolic, but I know when she’s doing it, and she knows I know.

Watching Emily, I knew that she was teaching me to understand linguistics and Lacan’s theory of symbolic mandates and their discontents in ways that my fellow graduate students would never get. They could recite chapter and verse of the dry letter, but my understanding was drenched in the wet experience of a messy diaper and a babbling baby, a selectively mute toddler with a defiant turn of the head, and a young child grinning at me knowingly after deflecting a scolding by flashing a supremely blank expression. My professors often remarked that I was remarkably “quick” with theory; they had no idea who my teacher really was.

Emily’s first word was “book.” Her therapists were startled by her precocity. Most children with Down’s have significant language delays, and Emily, it has turned out, is no exception except for that first word, which came early, just after she was a year old. She used it often; in fact, it seemed that every time I entered the room, she would say, “Book!” So I would dutifully go to the shelf and pick a favorite, and we would sit together and read and point and look at pictures. Her therapists, although impressed with her understanding of books—she turned them right-side up and showed remarkable fine motor coordination in her ability to turn pages—suggested that we try to encourage her to play with something other than books. We were puzzled; after all, books were our favorite playthings as well. But we dutifully bought her a play kitchen complete with a high chair. She checked it out, tried out the telephone, the microwave with the little bell, and the mini fridge. Then she went and got a baby doll, put it in the high chair, and sat down to read it a book.

It wasn’t until almost a year later, when she had other words, that I realized that I had overlooked something very important. My mother, Nana to Emily, was showing her a family portrait that we had taken. As Nana pointed, Emily named her people: “Nana, Pap-pap, Daddy, Book!” Stunned, I realized that I was Book. When I entered a room, Emily said Book because she was greeting me. I hadn’t noticed that she rarely, if
ever, said "Mommy." Again, Lacanian theory helped me process this behavior, whereas Emily's behavior taught me something important about Lacanian theory. When she was still just three months old, I took a job at a bookstore. Whenever I closed, Will would bring her to the store, and I would sit on the floor in the children's section to nurse her while Will vacuumed. So as her infant eyes began to increase their focal length in that first year, she went from breast to Mommy's face to books, forming a complex metonymic relationship between the three. She learned, too, that when Mommy was away from her, she was at the bookstore.

Like all mothers in Lacanian parlance, I would become for Emily her most profound lost object, but she had found a way to symbolize her loss with a signifier, a deeply overdetermined signifier whose importance would persist throughout her early years. She played with books, she cuddled with books, and she slept with books. Whenever she found a pen or marker she wrote on my books—angry little scribbles on the pages of the books that I was currently reading—that took my attention away from her. How could she know that my dry work always brought me back to her? When she went to kindergarten, the teacher said that she would go to the reading nook and pull all of the books from the shelves and arrange them in a circle around her. I ached when I heard that. It reminded me so of the feral children I had read about who surrounded themselves with glasses of water—symbols of the maternal container that they had lost. My wet work and my dry work were indistinguishable.

I was back in graduate school by this time, studying Lacan in earnest, tracing my way through the existentialists and continental philosophers that informed his thought and the poststructuralists he worked alongside and sometimes against. Emily and I would work together in the living room. I would look up from reading Kierkegaard to find Jiminy Cricket giving Pinocchio the same advice that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous Judge William was giving his young auditor in Either/Or—stay away from companions like Honest John who would encourage you to live aesthetically, that is, to smoke, drink and carouse, and choose instead to live ethically, to be authentic, tell the truth, and let your conscience be your guide. Or I would be reading and writing about the role of story in shaping subjectivity and realize that Emily was learning fear from her books and videos—she was desperately afraid of the page in Disney's Bambi where Faline was being attacked by dogs because Faline looked afraid—but she didn't fear Monstro the Whale at all because Pinocchio was working to free himself and his father from those murderous jaws rather than cowering before them. Her favorites, though, were the characters who sang about escaping their limitations—Belle, Aladdin, and Ariel, all caught in bodies and circumstances that defined and controlled them. We watched, I read, we sang, I wrote, and sometimes we wept.

Then I got pregnant. It was time. Emily was nearly five, and I had finished the coursework for my Ph.D. The pregnancy was too fresh to talk about, too early to see, but somehow I believe that Emily knew because she starting pooping in her bed.

Toilet training had gone well. Because of my reading of Lacan, I knew the power of binaries for someone not securely invested in the symbolic. Emily's world was still heavily imagistic—it was a world without linguistic nuance. She had some small grasp of number concepts and metaphor. In our first real conversation, for example, she had asked me for a brownie: "Choc cake?" "Oh, you want a brownie? Okay, hold out your hand." She did, and I placed a brownie in it. Then she held out her other hand expectantly. "Two?" (Or, maybe "too"? I can't be sure.) "Oh, no, honey, you may only have one." "Mommy. Pig.

I was thrilled. This exchange was the most complex we'd ever had.

I mostly lived in a world of one-word utterances and simple associations. So when her teacher, bless her heart, asked if she could start taking Emily's diaper off at school so she could learn to make the association between dry and good and wet and bad (I guess the nut doesn't fall too far from the tree after all), I agreed readily. It was theoretically sound after all. Time is a linguistic construct. We live in a perpetual present, but our language, our stories, give us the past and the future. I don't know how Emily processed the narrative flow of her videos and books, but I knew that those concepts weren't yet in place. She didn't have signifiers for things like "sometimes," as in "sometimes you can do it in your diaper and sometimes on the potty." It was all or nothing. And just as Lacan had said, toilet training was Emily's gift to us. Children don't choose to go to the reading nook and pull all of the books from the shelves and arrange them in a circle around her. It reminded me so of the feral children I had read about who surrounded themselves with glasses of water—symbols of the maternal container that they had lost. My wet work and my dry work were indistinguishable.

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became clear that this was a thing and that it was directed at me. After all, she never pooped in bed when she spent the night at Nana and Pap-pap's, and she never pooped when Will was home at night. But that was only on weekends; he worked second shift, and she and I were alone for our bedtime ritual five nights a week. We would sit together—her on her little potty, me on the floor with a big stack of books, reading to her—sometimes for almost an hour before bed, both of us trying to do what we knew would please the other, but our bodies played out their own contentious drama. When I gave up I would tuck her into bed and start my work. Within an hour, a tell-tale smell would waft out of Emily's room, and I would have to interrupt my blissfully book-scented dry work to clean up a disgusting, smeary mess. Poop on the potty had been her gift to me, and now she was taking it back. The little shit.

I was angry, and she sensed it. But, as I said, I was convinced that she also sensed my pregnancy. It wasn't just books and ideas that were taking her mommy away this time; this time my body, always there for her even when my mind was far away, was leaving. She was the undisputed princess of a small kingdom of devoted subjects, and I think she knew this idyll was about to shatter like a jealous queen's looking glass. Indeed, if Mommy's body wasn't hers anymore, then hers would not be Mommy's.

One particularly awful (offal? It's almost funny now—writing about it helps) night, the stench reached out to me, and I found myself confronting a Sadean nightmare. My precious little angel-straight-from-heaven was silently smearing the stuff on the walls, her body, even her face and mouth. I was undone. "Crazy people do this, Emily!" I screamed ineffectively. "This is what people in insane asylums do!" But then a grim academic humor descended on me: I was resolved that our story would not belong to the Marquis de Sade and Michel Foucault. I didn't like the work of French poststructuralist Foucault, with his clinical reduction of everything to power and discourse without a possibility of transcendence. I know that he wrote about people like Emily and that his work contained an indictment of society's response to them, but it was an airless critique, without hope. My daughter's bedroom was a Lacanian drama of resistance and negotiation, not a cold and overdetermined Foucauldian clinic. I had to believe in us—we would do more than adapt and capitulate.

Starting that night I girded my loins with Lacanian theory and began to tell a new story about what was going on. Emily wasn't trying to take back her love gift—she was testing its limits. Like the little Lacanian neurotic that she is, she was asking if I would love her beyond the pleasure principle—all the way through the mantle of disgust that accompanies jouissance. I was deep in it literally, I might as well be just as deep theoretically. This was why the scene didn't play for Nana or even her father—her relationships with them nested comfortably in the imaginary, where Nana was all things good and pretty and comfortable and Daddy was her prince. But she needed more from me. I was beyond the imaginary and the symbolic for her—I was her real, and I had started to smell wrong. She needed me to go all the way to ugly and back with her before this new baby came along. And she trusted me enough to test me. I worried then—I worry now—that I had already failed.

I don't remember when she stopped pooping in the bed, but I'm sure it was shortly after I changed the story. After that night, after I used my dry work to figure out what the hell was going on, I stopped giving her my angry words, my tensed body, and simply and silently plucked her up from her fouled bed, plunked her down in a warm bath, changed her sheets and jammies, and tucked her in with a kiss and lullaby. I let the sounds of the song that went beyond their meaning soothe us both. I guess she stopped because she got her question answered. If my Lacanian interpretation is correct, I hope that's what happened.

I do know that she forgave me. When I brought the interloper home, Emily sobbed for the longest time she had ever sustained a cry in her entire life. Blair was four days old, and she was crying in her bassinet. Emily yelled at her to stop, but I chose to comfort Emily rather than the baby. I held her close and let the Coats sisters' cry-off exhaust itself, knowing that Emily needed me more at that moment than she ever had.

A few days later I was nursing Blair when Emily came into the room. She stopped and stared, transfixed by the sight of the nursing couple, the completed circuit that excluded her, once and for all, from uncontested access to my body. Lacan says that the sight of the unweaned brother or sister is the scene that marks the beginning of the real, the beginning of the symbolic. Emily's response that day was probably the most moving experience I have ever known. As she watched her sister at her mother's breast, it was as if she were under a spell. Images, especially images that represent sites of unspeakable satisfaction, captivate us; Emily was caught, unable to turn her eyes away, unable to speak. I spoke one word, as gently as I knew how, "Emily." She shook her head slightly, as if to clear it, and then she looked at me. Walking over to my nightstand, she took my glasses, kissed each lens with an almost exaggerated tenderness, and handed them to me. And then she walked away.

I was stunned. So much theory focuses on what goes wrong in human experience, how we learn to hurt ourselves and others. Where is the theory that explains such generosity? What could she have been thinking?
Did she wish to give me the vision she had just had? She had glasses, too; perhaps she thought they were the instruments through which sharing vision was possible—that if I had my glasses on, I might see what she saw. But why the kisses? Once again, I turned to Lacan. While his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre and some misguided Lacanians focused on the objectifying power of the gaze, how it strips us of our agency and turns us into an object for the other even as we turn others into objects for ourselves, Lacan reminds us that the gaze is a love object. In the gaze of the other, we are recognized; it is a gift to be seen. Perhaps Emily kissed the lenses of my glasses because she knew that even with a new babe at my breast I could still see her, or perhaps she kissed them because they represented a love gift, a gift that let me know that she saw me. A moment like this is inexhaustible for the dry work of interpretation; in wet work, it is to cherish.

My story would not be complete, of course, without a word about Blair, although I find I have less to say about her here, since both dry and wet work where she is concerned have been considerably smoother. She eased into my life, becoming more of a wonder to me than the enigma her sister is. She is preternaturally wise and more closely in touch with her unconscious than anyone I know of except Wendy Darling. My neighbor calls her an old soul; everyone who spends more than five minutes with her walks away with their own Blair story to tell. From the time she was three and a half she has made the most startling utterances, making me wonder whether the Lacan I was reading while I was pregnant with her didn't write itself on her little psyche in utero. We learned, for instance, that her unconscious is a green house, where she lives with the pets we won't let her have and the "good mommy" who is never preoccupied or tired or cranky. She goes there to think and make up stories and to hide when she's been naughty. She's been known to walk around with a clipboard asking us to tell her how we feel because she is, she claims, the doctor of feeling good. She has a fiercely active imagination that she uses to entertain herself, scare herself, and fill her world with drama it wouldn't otherwise possess. She was a late talker, but around the time she was four she began talking without ceasing, and I am struck by the similarity between her incessant chatter and Emily's nocturnal trials. Although radically different in character—thank goodness—it feels so much like the same test: Will you love me beyond your ability to endure my questions, beyond all reasonable patience, beyond the talk that spills out despite my best efforts to keep quiet for just a few minutes for heaven's sake? Of course. Always.

You don't date Lacan, you marry him, I tell students. And it feels like I not only married him but together we've also given birth to multiple lives—two children, a book, and me in both scholarly and maternal guises. Lacanian theory gives me a narrative to connect those two selves, see my wet work with (mostly) dry eyes, infuse my dry work with something living and fluid, find a theory adequate to my embodiment, and live an embodied theory. In fact, recently a doctor told me that I have a relatively rare condition known as dermographia—literally, a writing on the skin. I smiled. He doesn't know the half of it. I guess Lacan would say I'm enjoying my symptom.