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Rebekah Jenkins

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IF LANGUAGE CAN BE A KIND OF CRYING, A RESPONSE TO KEETJE KUIPERS

Rebekah Jenkins

My daughter's first language was crying. I was familiar with it, but I was reintroduced as the days passed. Fussy, staccato cries meant she was uncomfortable, perhaps from a burp stuck in her tiny abdomen or soiled diaper. Long, drawn out cries meant she needed food. Crying is a type of language we know in different levels. There are sad and happy tears, tears of frustration and tears from contentment. There are forgotten tears and tears held back, tears that are long overdue and tears right on schedule. All of it, my daughter and I have known together, and our fluency has only grown in these short three years.

When Alaska sees me crying, her first question is, "Are you sad, Mommy?"

"Yes, baby, Mommy is very sad."

"Oh. I'm sad too."

"What are you sad about?"

"Um, just nuffing, I think."

Our conversations about sadness aren't complicated, and rarely do I feel like I've made some breakthrough to my three-year-old. I try to explain as best I can that my sadness comes from a place inside me that feels broken, yet I know it isn't because to say it is broken is to say that I am broken, which I don't think at all. It is enough for me to say that, "Mommy is sad just because. It is okay to feel sad sometimes," to which she grabs my face with both of her chubby little toddler hands, kisses me, and runs away to color or play with her favorite dinosaur toy.

Crying can be a kind of language. Crying says what sentences constructed of verbs and nouns and adjectives shy away from. Crying is the language we begin life with, our first language. It is urgent, hot, flashy, yet most of the time unknown to passersby, unknown to people in your own house, because, hell, it's easier to wipe tears onto a dark green sweater than to interrupt your child's pre-dinner playtime with questions about why you are sad.

Similarly, it is easier to stop your child's tears than your own.

Children don't have the adult language to explain why things hurt, why something makes them cry, it just does. I ask if she bumped her head, she says "Yeah" in a high wail that I'm sure sounds demonic to the tenants on the other side of the wall. Ghosts of our injuries are let out and live in the space between hurt and forgiveness.

Crying is a language, and it says "I am here. I feel things, I passionately feel things. I'm hurt. I'm grieving. I'm aching heavily, and my body has no other way to let the ache out." To dismiss crying as anything but a language is to deny our first cry, the very thing that lets the world know we made it out alive.

