FORCES OF NATURE: A Dream Retold

I was on a trip away from my family in Boston--my wife, my daughter, my son--to serve as a staff member for a writers' conference in the California Sierras, near Lake Tahoe. Though I had been on trips before, trips of body and of mind, I had never been so distant from my family and my teaching job before. I was fifty-two. Back home at this time, close friends of my wife were living a family tragedy. Their youngest child, a boy the same age as my son, who was my son's best friend, had been fighting liver cancer for three years, and now the cancer had metastasized in his brain. I had just heard this news from my wife by phone. That same afternoon, the afternoon before my dream, I had been talking about my son to a young woman writer from Los Angeles who had been adopted and who was part-Korean and part-Jewish. Come evening, the hundred or so of us gathered to hear a talk by a dream expert, one Naomi Epel, whose hocus pocus talk about writing, dreams and the subconscious I thought silly. As I walked back to my staff cottage, I vowed not to dream. Of course I did dream. This dream. And yes, I did honor it on waking. I did write it down.

In my dream I am nine years younger and I don't live in Boston, but rather in a valley that's ringed by picturesque foothills and peaks and has been cultivated by damming a river, so that at one mouth of the valley there is an imposing concrete dam, not quite as imposing as the Hoover Dam, for instance, but imposing nevertheless. The dam has long spillways, a concrete span, floodgates, high-tension wires, and so forth, and behind the dam has risen a huge, recreational lake that stretches for twenty miles. The mountain valley is populated by privileged white families (including mine) and also by poor families of many races, which I am aware of as a fact, but not aware of as an uncomfortable one, any more than I am aware of the water gathered

in the lake as an uncomfortable fact. Otherwise I am what I am in my waking life. A tenured college literature teacher, getting by. As in my waking life, my wife and I have two children, but in my dream they are younger. My birth daughter is eight years old, and my adopted Korean son is an infant, just as he was when he arrived in our home. Our decision to adopt followed several years of trying to have a second child of our own: years of trial centered on me, at my grief at being infertile, and on my reluctance to take on the responsibility of an additional child, but years, also, of mounting pressures from my wife.

In my dream, my daughter does not figure. Because of my privileged position in the valley, I hear that the dam is about to break, that the valley will be flooded. I hear this in time to gather my wife and son and drive to higher ground. So that when disaster comes, when the dam does in fact break and the tidal wave floods the valley, sweeping away all lives before it, we are safe. Afterward, we are able to return to our house to resume our lives. In my dream, the poor people, on the contrary, many of who are Korean, have lost everything, all of their children. They have had no warning. The water has descended upon them like a Biblical curse. Word spreads among these survivors that I have a son that is Korean. Not only do I carry on my privileged life in the face of catastrophe--my house modest yet comfortable, my grass green, my color television and lights beaming, my cupboard well stocked--but my son is one of theirs. This becomes a cause, reported by the media. There are slogans, placards, chants. I am horrified that our private lives have been transformed into images, symbols. The poor people organize and march on our house, surrounding it like the very waters we have escaped. They cry out for justice. Why should my son, one of theirs, remain with me? I try to explain, I am shouted down. They are pressing in on us, threatening to take my son from me. The dream, as dreams do, fills me with emotion, with guilt. My inability to explain. To reason with their calls for justice. To

escape with our lives, and with my son. I am weeping, powerless, misunderstood, and futile. I wake. Wake to my life where there is no valley, no dam, no catastrophe. But where there is guilt, always. And where I will never, ever take the blessing of my son for granted.