

Cassie Premo Steele

Dreams of Fire

7:45 a.m. I wake from a dream. The image burns. His clothes in her crib. He has left them there. His underwear.

He touches me. The baby is not yet awake. An invitation. I pull away.

The fire goddess, Pele, makes volcanoes rise from beneath the earth, and makes islands out of her anger.

I am an island. Made of fire. My dreams burn in me, and I turn away from my husband, from his desire.

I am a survivor. I say it. To myself. What I suffer from is my own past. But the dream is what I suffer from in the present. In the dream it is my baby. In danger.

So I wake. As a mother. And wonder.

Alone.

2:16 a.m. I wake again, hot and anxious, worried about Lily's new preschool, certain that the teacher is not good for her. She is too nervous, too talkative, too much.

Lying there, in the dark, I remember that "too muchness" is a signal of trauma.

I get up, go to the couch in the living room, start to write. What I know to do. To survive.

Today, I write, when I picked her up after her first day, the teacher's face was red and sweaty, and Lily's body was limp and exhausted. She felt like a doll, filled with lead.

I tried to talk to Meili about it before we went to bed. He was tired, turned over. Told me to let it go.

I begin to page through the yellow pages, looking for another preschool. I find that the one we have an appointment to visit has flexible, part-time rates. This calms me enough that I think I can finally go back to sleep.

The cat walks in to the living room with a huge cockroach in her mouth. I look away.

I survived by looking away.

When my father raped my mother, I looked away.

When he whipped his belt against my bedroom wall, I looked away.

But still I heard the sounds.

No.

Crack.

No preschool today. Lily is home, safely. As she crawls on a blanket on the back porch, my thoughts turn to work: a deadline for an essay due in two days, an email I need to send to an editor, thoughts of a new project.

The only time I feel she is safe is when she is with me. She is not safe at her school. She is not safe when I am sleeping. She is not safe when I go away. So I keep her home from school. I do not sleep. I do not go away.

I am so tired, I feel like I am on fire.

It is said that when Pele is angry, she appears as a woman, stamping her feet. The earth shakes. Fire rises.

I want to make something burn. Shake myself, take the dreams out of myself, make all the earth take notice this way.

3:18 a.m. I wake again from a dream where my desire returns, and we try to make love, but Lily's crib bars are down, she might fall out, so we try to put them up, but they squeak, and she wakes, so we do not make love.

What were we doing in her room? I think, in the dark. Has someone been in her room?

I get up, walk to her room, quiet and black, open the door slowly, and feel the floor for wet semen.

Butterflies rush in my blood. I can hear my heart pounding. I find nothing.

Lily is napping and I pick up the phone. Call the rape crisis hotline. Tell them.

Say the words.

I am a survivor. And I am having dreams. Dreams of my daughter, abused. By her father. I don't know if it is happening. For real.

The counselor uses the word, "Revisitation." I see it, like this, with capitalization, a category, in my head. Like visitation. He has come back. To get us.

Visitation. A one-bedroom apartment in Sioux Falls, Iowa. The bedroom is filled with papers he has collected. Receipts and paper placemats. Sheets of his craziness.

We will sleep, in the hot summer night, on a bare mattress in the living room, all three of us, my father, my sister, and me.

Before bed, he rubs apple cider vinegar over my sister's sunburned back. She screams. The skin burns red. Erupts. Volcanoes. He does not stop. Someone told him it would work, he says, again and again, getting angry.

My sister gets quiet at his anger. Afraid he will erupt. Only her skin still seethes. I look away.

The counselor, still on the phone, suggests a group for survivors. I say I will consider going but know I won't go. The truth is I don't want to dig deeper, fear going back any more will make me crazier. I want so much to be stable, grounded, solid. Hanging up the phone, I see myself trying to jump through the air. But when I land, the earth shakes under my feet.

8:03 p.m. I put Lily in her crib, and she turns on her side and sighs, sleeping. On my way out of the room, I carefully put a small block behind the door. If the door is opened in the night, I will know it.

That night my mattress is on fire. I flee, again, in my dreams,
where I am screaming.

No one hears.

I wait for dawn.

The fire of the sun.

Hear her crying.

Go get her. The block knocks against the door as I open it. Unmoved.

I tell her good morning.

Lily gets a new teacher at school. The nervous, sweaty one is
gone. And she is happy. Smiles as I'm leaving. Eyes bright when I pick
her up. For two days this week, I have gotten some work done.

Small things. Reading. Queries. One poem.

I think about writing about this. This. The fire I feel.
Revisitation. Mother Survivor. Titles come to me. I am afraid.

I call a writer-mentor friend. She is distracted, not really
listening. Tells me to write when I'm ready. This is not what I need to hear.
I am on fire.

4:52 a.m. A redheaded four year-old girl, an orphan, comes to us,
in my dream. We take her in. But I don't think we can keep her, it is too
much, I am not able to focus on Lily, I am distracted, exhausted, I can't give
her all I want, it isn't fair to her.

I wake, tell Meili my dream. “It isn’t fair to her?” he says. “It isn’t fair to us.”

In the morning, I write again. The dream was a breakthrough. Somehow, as cruel as it sounds, I cannot take in this orphan (who is myself as a child) and be the mother I want to be. I have to give my self as a child back in order to be the mother Lily needs. The mother I want to be.

I call her. The woman who was the witness to my memories almost ten years ago. We make an appointment. I write it down.

The teacher is back. She had only been out temporarily, and now she’s back. I talk to the director. I am almost in tears. There is something wrong with this teacher, I can feel it.

That afternoon, when I go to pick Lily up, the teacher is diapering her in her crib as I walk through the door. This is strange, I think. Then as I get closer, I notice Lily is asleep. So why was the teacher, so close, moving her hands over the baby’s body, in her sleep? I pick my baby up. And never take her back.

Allison listens. She wants to know every detail. The crawling on the floor at night. The blocks behind the door. The dreams. Lily’s limp body. The teacher. My fears. Everything.

And as the words come out of me, like ashes, I feel the fire burning down. I see the razed ground. I see my skin again, in need of healing.

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She hands me bandages. With her eyes. I place the tears,
carefully, over the blisters, to cool the wounds.

The dreams go away. So do my suspicions of my husband. We find a
new preschool. The redheaded girl recedes. Goes back into my past.

The flames are gone. But sometimes, at dusk, I can still smell the
land, smoking. And when I do, I trust my husband to rock our daughter
to sleep, and I go outside, into the air of cooling night. I breathe deeply,
and slowly, I begin to write.