

Read an excerpt of Dark Visitations by Alison Armstrong:

Summer Sacrifice

*The fear within the fascination,
The danger within the seduction,
The razor within the caramel apple,
I shape myself to feed my longing.
Paring away, paring away
Flesh to bone,
Bone to stone.*

During the last frenzied days of summer, my willful sacrifice took place. Exhilarated from the debut performance of my song, “Bone to Stone” at the Bowery Brujas, I left the nightclub purged of fear and regret.

The late summer night air hummed with the sounds of insects desperate to mate and destined to die. Although nearly drowned out by the relentless roar of traffic, their serenades persisted as soft, hissing enticements.

“Come, Alley,” they seemed to urge. “Take flight with me. Before the winter, while the time is ripe.”

A screech of brakes blasted my ears. A shadow crossed the swollen moon as I stepped off the curb and met my fate. Struck by a speeding car, my head split open by mandibles of chrome, I bid farewell to my mortal life and awaited my rebirth.

Over a year has passed since my resurrection and transformation, each year of my former existence growing more distant, less real. Released from human ties, I write this account of visions and events to remind myself what it was like to be part of a doomed hominid species, and to preserve with words moments lost in the amnesiac-inducing ravages of time. Only in remembrance, perhaps, do moments gain a mystical luster and mortal life a tragic nobility.

Between Worlds

Like my birth, twenty-seven mortal years ago, my Awakening began in a solipsistic limbo and culminated with a bloody craving.

Between worlds, I floated in cocooned darkness, only the most tenuous of threads connecting me to life. My eyes and lips sealed within layers of cottony softness, I drifted in and out of memories, dreams, unseen noises, and sensations. Sometimes I heard pulsings and wheezings interrupted by strident beeps. Sometimes, from underneath my protective cocoon, I felt what seemed to be hands touching me while voices murmured from above, low and somber. Although my lips were silent, my mind cried out, *“Hear me, awaken me, bring me back to life.”*

Pieces of the person I used to be, moments of her life, emerged from the depths beyond my shrouded eyes:

She begins with a scream, sound and movement erupting, red womb walls squeezing, pushing her through a tight, wet tunnel. Pain slashes like a razor against her skin, and white light sears her eyes.

She buries her trauma with sleep, the blank, wordless hibernation of infancy, not recalling, until years later, what was to be her earliest memory.

A flutter of black wings awakens her from hibernation, ushering in her first verbal thoughts as she sits on the living room floor in front of the fireplace, playing with alphabet blocks while her mom and grandparents, nearby, watch TV. With clumsy hands, she places one wooden block on top of the other, entranced by the cryptic, colorful symbols she does not yet understand. She feels protected and safe, enclosed in her sheltered world as if it were a Christmas snow globe, impervious to anything from beyond its airtight dome. Suddenly, however, the hermetic seal is broken when a black bird emerges from the fireplace. Her precarious tower of alphabet blocks wobbles as the bird swoops and circles around the room.

“Bird!” her mother exclaims, giving this ebony-feathered presence a name.

“Bird,” her toddler self repeats. She hears her own voice echo inside her head. This is the sound of her thoughts, which, once heard, will very rarely be silent. Planted within her, the seed of language evolves into an isolating awareness she sometimes longs to escape.

Imprinted by the black bird, she is initiated into the mystery of words. Adept in their magic, she quickly learns their power and their peril. Through them, she can create her own worlds, yet in them, she can also be trapped.

With unspoken words, I tried to summon my freedom from this immobile body. Vapor clouds of thoughts flowed from me like those in cartoons. I imagined them drifting in the air, mist-carried messages praying for deliverance or rebirth.

I felt a jolting vibration as a mind, somewhere nearby, received and understood them. A whoosh of cool air swept over me, as if flapped by large, graceful wings.

A silken presence touched me, feather-light but insistent, caressing my throat gently, as if to release my stifled cries. Something soft and moist pressed against my neck, rubbing, then penetrating, sharp as a needle, drawing from me warm, throbbing pulses of blood. I felt what seemed to be lips sucking and hands ripping the gauze wrappings covering my mouth.

A briny, sweet substance trickled onto my lips. Awakened into my new life, I cried out in hunger and release.

Strange Forest

“Once there was a forest with strange animals in it,” she writes in her notebook, words eagerly stumbling across lined paper, worlds forming from fairytale scaffolds and her dreams. She writes without knowing or caring where the magic will take her, this child I once was.

This child and her scrawled pencil writings with misshapen illustrations are becoming fainter and even less decipherable but stubbornly resist erasure. This little girl who wanted to live in that forest with those animals still haunts me, even though my connection to her and my former life diminishes with time.

Branches of memory droop, festering fruit so heavy they weaken her connection to the source. A forest of moments, enchanted once, exudes an eerie innocence. In this forest of my childhood imagination, Hero, a collie deformed by a botched surgery and abandoned by his owners, provides refuge to his family of beasts mistreated by humans. A blind horse with a glass eye, and a kitten with her feet on backwards, among other animals in Hero’s misfit family, are like Mary Shelley’s monster, patchwork entities. Created and pieced together from scraps of stories told by my mother and grandmother, heard on the news, or seen in movies, my characters represent distorted interpretations of tales involving injuries, birth defects, bizarre illnesses, and other disturbing incidents. Scarred by trauma, they find shelter in my fantasies of the fatherly Hero and his tree-shrouded paradise.

Unlike Hero, my own father is absent. When I was younger, about toddler age, I used to think that I was born fatherless, an anomaly no more unbelievable at the time than to think of being abandoned by a father when I was but a shrimp-like homunculus, blissfully ensnared in an amniotic balloon. When I later discovered I did have a dad, I asked why he had left me, and Grandma told me he had mysteriously vanished before I was born. “Lost in a forest perhaps,” she said, the morbid fairytale trope illogically assuring. It was better to think of him wandering, searching for Mommy and me than to think of him as someone who, I later realized, had never wanted me.

The years of missing an absent daddy are long gone. I’m too grown up to need a father, too jaded to need a hero. I only need the One who, delivering me from mortal bonds, feeds my starving, feral soul.

As I look back on my brief temporal existence, I realize that I was destined to cast it all aside, abandoning it, like my father abandoned me. In my loneliness and alienation, I created stories of misfit animals, and with my sorcerous imagination, summoned unearthly creatures, some beautiful and seductive,

some terrifying and malignant. Free from the fatal forward-moving momentum of time, I revisit the experiences and otherworldly encounters shaping my mortal life and foreshadowing my immortal rebirth.

