Rachel Milligan

QUEEN

CARRION
for Dylan,
my perfect reader
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QUEEN CARRION
QUEEN CARRIER
AS A GIRL I KEPT A NEON FLAMINGO LIGHT IN MY ROOM
MY CHILDHOOD NICKNAME WAS “RACHEL THE SNAKE”
TAME
ON THE OCCASION OF
IS THE SILHOUETTE YOU TRACED OF MY BODY STILL ON YOUR DINING ROOM TABLE?

We met staring down
into the same well

generated with asian watermeal
I noticed his eyes caught too long

on my lips. I have leaned over
the plaid side of a plaid couch

Alone in a room with orange webworms
he left me half an apple & instructions: let

your covered-in-mascara-hands
fall limp when no one’s

watching them
I walk home

fall toward the edge
of my ability to carry

He makes me
cloudy like broth

The fishbone steers toward
catches the stork
IS THERE A WAY TO SLEEP THIS SEASON OFF?

He put salt water in. He put
the smallest sound inside
my stomach in. He put
mosquito netting in.

He smeared attar
on my neck.

He put dalmatian
chrysanthemums in.

He put the conversation with
a widow in
the hour without
stopping. A hollowed-
out tree trunk in
the bookshelf in

the middle of the night.
The unintelligible drag

in a fistful of grass
in the purple river light
in the expat coffee shop.
The building we broke

into was in. He put
the muddy handful

of pearls in
the promise of

a house. He put
a mulberry in, a tiny

worm. He put the wall
in the rain walking home.

He did not
put bedsheets in.

He never put
the bottle in.

He did not, would not
come to the house.

He did not mar
me with rain.
ARE YOU FOAMING AT THE MOUTH?

So bats bring indelible confusion: confusion, which is night, night,

which is just below the skin. So this is the promise of bats: bats

bubble just beneath the eyelids, like stars. Bats search for a thing

in a house filled with ashes. Somewhere a bat grinds his teeth. Some-

how, through stained glass, I see the shadow of bats. When I am

quiet, you say you want to draw a sunset on me. When I am quiet,

every bat in the field is frightened. Every light passing, on the highway,

is a lavender bat that wants to eat me alive. So I am the wrong person to

ask about bats. So the sky endlessly bakes bread for bats to burrow through.
So, in unison, you and I tell a stranger
we saw a bat fly directly into a furnace.

So, Ian, this is why I struggle with
thoughts like a baby, why I scream.
IAN TRAPPED A BEE UNDER A PINT GLASS IN HIS BEDROOM FOR THREE DAYS AND THEN LET IT OUT ON THE PORCH AND WATCHED IT DIE. DOES HE HAVE A RIGHT TO GIVE ME ADVICE?

Yesterday you decided to keep me in a stable for the rest of our lives.

You wouldn’t tell me what I said in your dream, but I saw my lips forming around words like two fat worms, like my hands like a baby’s hands. If I was there when the bee was released, does that change anything? Ian & I have never met. He’s an exhibit in a museum. You, you are the chapped crow. You leave me alone to think about everything I’ve ever done. You kiss my dark ear tips. You sit on my legs to keep me from walking. In the stable, I sit on my own legs. I sit on crime scene lines. I sit on purple remnants of fire in the fire pit. I sit like a mountain sits. In the
dream, I amble toward the sun. On
the bus, I see a woman with a croco-
dile face. I see a schoolgirl holding
a goldfish in a bag. I see you. I shut
my eyes. I step toward the setting
HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT HOW MANY THINGS YOU PHRASE AS QUESTIONS?

Fat fish sharpen knives. Unidentified, he enters the room I have constructed, says, “I am naked, but I haven’t noticed yet.” Forgive me. I only want to keep you longer than a bottle of milk.

My ribs a swimming pool for birds to live and do their work in. A white hot prayer slips between the buttons on my shirt. Remember we let white hot prayers slip between our eyelids.

The bird asks, what are you running from? Remember my heart chewed teaberry gum for you? We drank prosecco on the roof?
It doesn’t work anymore. Nobody knows why. I don’t even want to know why. I just want to know why you painted the fire like that, like there’s someone hidden in the edge, pulling back curtains to let in smoke. We were just kids, we clawed at the orange walls of your parents’ house with bird feet, waited in the park after midnight for anything that could eat us alive. You held me down in the blue water. I held the water in my mouth, swished it around with my tongue. I wanted to melt into a field of black and blue lavender. You wanted to plaster my body with the pages of a calendar. Ian says there is a voice under my voice. I say there is a ledge under the ledge I sleep under. She says, I’ve never done this before, and I believe her. I squeeze her skin and it is an articulate mouth that says I’ve never done this before, never will again, again and again and again and again and again. There is a type of bird that sleeps forever without waking. What I’m trying to say is I am going to wear you down. A woman is not a series of rooms. I am not a thousand tongues. I am only one giant one.
You and I live in the dark, we know what it’s like to live in the dark. In the living dark, we swallow sequins, we swallow pearls. I try to write you a love letter, then bury my feet in orange rinds. I’m sorry, wine glass. I’m sorry, lamp. Ian says I could be a sad, white clown. Let’s have a cup of coffee, now. Swing a bough of flowers to my cell. Make sad, twangy sounds with your mouth, with an old drum. I get out of bed, apologize to the bed: I’m sorry, bed. I’m sorry, stove. Through the curtain, he hands me a handful of pearls, says, Hands are not the mouths of birds. I’m sorry, hands. I’m sorry, Joe. You can’t slip that apology into my hands and get away with it. I fit both hands inside a conch shell. I sit on my hands and twang.
ARE THERE GREENHOUSES WHERE YOU COME FROM? ARE THEY GREEN?

You are still asleep somewhere, alcoved away. Unconsciously you crouch into

a small circle of dirt
Your vibrating skin warms

the skinlayer of dust. I see you but I do not know

where you are. I slouch inside a dim room, a plastic-covered couch. Sweat coats the hand clutching

a plastic cup of wine The man I talk to

is somewhere else, too He exhales. I hear your hand

not touch my hand He inhales. You hear me cross,
uncross my thighs
Once, we watched

a thunderstorm from
a hushed black dock

I turned to you and lit up
from the fear of hearing it
IS THE INJURY NO LONGER NEEDED?

You do not buy a new bikini. You do not shut your eyes. The pathway in the minigolf course does not crawl with junebugs. You do not sate desire to roam. You do not roam like a deer through an industrial park at night, where security lights make every lawn into a polaroid. You do not eat. You do not eat desperate styrofoam cups in fistfuls like a deer with fists. You do not see. You do not place your father’s Trusty Shellback certificate facedown on the table so it cannot look at you. You do not talk. You do not want to tell Ian anything. You’re not sorry. You tread water. You tread water beside her, horseshoe crab. You tread water beside her, gutted risk. You know people who have seen ghosts. They lived alone. You say don’t let go of the spiderweb through a mouthful of spiderwebs. You never try. You never reason with a coward. You never try to reason with a coward, especially not that one.
Once there was a wolf who devoured the place in which you lived. Some said he knew no aspect of caress. Some said he’d eat even candlelight. I turned down the radio to hear them more clearly. They said that only when the thunder breaks, the wolf sleeps. I have never known anything, but somehow, in the way some know, I knew I’d know the wolf. So, with empty pockets, I hitched a ride up to the blue hills, got left off just beyond the woods. I walked for days, ate wild arugula and clay, raised and lowered my hood for rain. At night, with closed eyes, I swore I heard the thrumming of flashlights. Finally, I approached the clearing. All my other voices left me, but I pressed on. The daylight delivered.

The wolf, having no knees, devoured my feet. I knelt. I covered the wolf with my hands. I
made no sound. I made no sound. I do not know how to placate the town. I have never known you or anyone. Stay close to me. I will make a pact with the dogs. They will not bother you again.
WHY ARE YOUR POCKETS INSIDE MY POCKETS?

I laid myself to rest inside the moment before the thunder broke, the warm, blue-gray room that is before the thunder broke. I never stopped drawing your body, you didn’t let me finish my sentence. I drew the feathered edge of the first time I touched a girl, the slipshod finagling that dots our lives in teal bursts, the dismissal of “secret” bones. We all know what glistening means. I drew your body as a net for leaves, as indecipherable shuffling on the forest floor, as a cloud, as noses of mice that cloud the floor. Here is a life rendered in linen and intimate knowledges. When I close my eyes, I am a tiny person inside my skull. I am not kidding. Ozone smell is a shell inside a shell. He said, this house is nobody’s house, were you listening? I am learning to breathe. Making sense of the subordinate life.
The shaded road. I promise to be with you when you die. To divide the mind like a river. I do.
IS THERE AN ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION?

The shadow where the ivy used
to be burns a hole

Your neighbor’s house
paneled with broken plates

The sky, red as a rooftop
The treetrunk lavender as the street

My skin straight from a hot bath
copper as cake. We meet

inside the edge. Another night
in your bed, the airplane overhead

stops my breath
Dirt in the windowscreen

keeps bugs from coming in
If you hold the candle

to your nose, ashes flicked
by breath disperse into

the carpet, melt away
The wick in the center
of the flame stares back
at you, a compound eye

Fire, the look of it,
drawn onto the house, like chalk
AM I LATE TO THE PARTY?

You make my jaw click while I am trying to sleep. I love you. You make me think of three wolves chasing the meatmoon, to get at the moonflesh, to take it in their mouths, to hold it there without biting. While I approach the clearing, I approach the clearing. While I approach the clearing, you make my jaw overfill with white moss. Robins with white underfeathers outside my window have white snow under their white underfeathers. Keep your ankles together. Keep your ankles together, whispering one, whirring reminiscent, shattered chime, heretic. Tell me a story that only happens once, unless it doesn’t. This is a story that wears white feathers under its white feathers. When the master points at the moon, most never see the moon at all. They only look at the master. I am approaching the clearing. What is
moss but a ventricle? What is moss but a tourniquet? What is a root but inveterate?
And he will cover you with his feathers.
I saw the shadows
of those birds outside the blinds
like the first time except

the edges wouldn’t leave
I stayed, staring
twelve hours passed

the pile of sheets on the floor
started to blossom
like a loaf of bread

tore me away
even you would want
to be in those sheets

I heard the tiny
animals crying from
the other poems, the

babies, the food
I had to muffle their cries
I crawled into those

sheets, I kept
crawling, I reached wet,
green stone and pushed
into it, my knees, my palms
into it, I pushed my cheek
against its mood
cool kitchen light, night
flits her hair with pink fingers

mosquitoes fly from
ratty blue rug
surrounded by shoeboxes

I think you have wanted
to cut off your fingers
and my fingers

you dance on the dining room table
the ceiling fan misses your head

I am a girl who pouts under the table
until you finally agree
chop off my fingers

your fingers flit at
your bangs
in fits of tears

carry me on your back
a palanquin
down the mountain
across the river
give me the advice
you want to give yourself
Genuine in my blue velvet nightgown,
I don’t want poetry to get old, to die,
but, as all things must, I will be
on the pier while it happens, caress
her delicate gray haunches. She doesn’t
mind if I look at her as if she were
my chair, as if she were my bed
as I approach sleep. She hides
among women unaware she is
the sacrifice, giggles with
her blindfold on, takes her time
with every button. As a girl
I had a neon pink flamingo light.
Looking back it seems I never
needed sleep, a bubble hovering
on the lip of a bottle
of bad beer. I had
a purple lava lamp, too.
Light and light together formed
intemperate pastel light.
It got dark. I still
don’t know how we were there:
Together? Alone? I always closed
my eyes. She grabbed me by
the neck and said a girl
can shoot another girl,
with a gun,
can watch her running
MY CHILDHOOD NICKNAME WAS “RACHEL THE SNAKE”

I fell down the stairs and took
an impossibly thin rivulet of pale
yellow paint with me. It curled free
in the nanosecond my fingernail
dragged down the wall. My father
was in the easy chair sewing his
ears back together, watching the
weather channel on mute. The paint-
string gasped, and I was turned away
from my probably-broken toes to it,

instead. The paint spoke too quietly
for me to hear. My father maintained
his steady, glassy eye contact with the
television. In the other room, you placed
old brass keys in a dusty wooden box
away from all sound because they could

hear the echo and be frightened by it.
Now, my father’s ears are mended except
he will occasionally hear antiphonal chants from far off in a field somewhere that go unanswered. This has been a bad year for seasons. You close the box because it smells like the dew. My skin is sheets of cold chalk. I comb my hair out with my fingers. The hairs fall unseen, silently to the carpet. The knot in your throat stretches across a canvas as your eyes follow me, two sad boats, while I am dressing.
Throw me for that loop again. The birds are in the trees, singing *noli me tangere*. So, *tangere*. Tango with my breath, my teeth. You and your wine-translucent skin. I’ve got a disease called “some- day” or “somewhere.” How best to break open me: think about how small I am. Wrap one hand completely around my waist. Whisper something I cannot hear, that I don’t want to hear. Whisper gamine fingernails and burrow them in the soft floor. Tell me the swimming pool was shallow and clear until I lay naked in it. You licked something clean away. Say what it was, I won’t know. The bed looks how it looks without you in it, like a burrow. When I get the pieces together, you’re going to want to hear about it.
ON THE OCCASION OF

It’s easier before the first time because afterwards, you know what you’re doing. This type of knowing is a sweatmark left on the leather seat of a taxi cab. You think of yourself. Is she laundry fresh, inchoate succubus, is she a genius? O, how I love the smell of genius.

Baby lips part to let the snake tongue come through.

Once, through a hotel window, I saw a riverboat casino wink at me. O, obscenity. I’m told backyard cats take time growing into those big heads. I’m told
nighttime brings you closer
to the dead. I’m told

the caged octopus always
gets her meat. My glasses
gone, this nighttime softly
tears paper into pieces with

the television on. I am
inertia bloom in the lone

blue light. I fall in love
with everyone I meet.
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