

Classic Poetry Series

Ioanna Carlsen
- poems -

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Ioanna Carlsen is a Mexican tesuque cane & rush chair maker & poet.

Ioanna Carlsen's poems have appeared in Poetry, The Hudson Review, Nimrod, FIELD, Prairie Schooner, Confrontation, Mondo Greco, Quarterly West, Beloit Poetry Journal, AGNI and many other literary magazines. She has been a featured poet at Poetry Daily and Poetry. One of her poems was chosen to be part of Billy Collins' Poetry 180. Her fiction, featured in Glimmer Train, has been included in an anthology entitled Mother Knows, published through Atria (a branch of Simon & Schuster). Five of her poems have also appeared in a new anthology of Greek-American Poetry, Pomegranate Seeds (Somerset Hall Press, 2008).

Breather

Back in the time when you breathed
I would say breath to you and you
would answer back,
I would say breathe to you and you would do it:
I could have filled a community of breathers
with what you had,
it was free, a birthright,
day and night, black and white,
it was yours, given,
the acceptable inevitable companionship of opposites,
in and out, breath or death, breathe or die,
the human situation.

Birds talk about it
from one tree to another,
conversing across a small valley,
they know what they talk about,
they know something is wrong —
your breathing, or dying,
they know and talk about it,
while inside this room with big picture windows
we whisper about it.

We whisper
and they discuss it through trees
and across a small valley,
in their secret language,
they chatter it all out, gossip,
how we lost our power:
what we couldn't imagine, couldn't control,
happened.

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Doll's House

The music comes on with the lights,
the little opera of emptiness begins, the little
dance of no one there —
just the rooms exhibited,
furniture in them like ideas,
a stage set waiting for action out of the blue.

But no,
even the fire in the hearth is neon, warms no one,
the drawers in the painted chests,
are filled with nothing,
the tables loaded with miniature, fake, repasts.

It's night outside, about to snow, the dollhouse lights are on:
you're in the dark,
watching the dollhouse like a thief,
pilfering its pockets for a clue to your own life,
wafted over by smells of cooking, and silence.

Inside the dark
a flute starts to play, imaginary people come in at the door:
invited to stay, they take off their coats,
tea is made in a miniature pot — oh,
it's good I hear you say, let's have crumpets too, and we put them on,
you and I, they're almost crumbs but we toast them,
and what kind of jam do you want, I say, on top of the butter,
and you say raspberry,
and I give it to you, reader,

I give it to you and we both eat.
Outside the big house it's snowing.
Applied frost creeps up the sides of the doll house windows,
the fake fireplace glows electric,
our toy dog sleeps on the rug —

a hush falls over this small house inside the big house,
we sleep in it...
I sleep, you sleep, he sleeps, she sleeps...
it sleeps, the real,

a sleep so delicious, we can dream in it,
as in a delirium, without sound...

windows opening into windows,
shoes never walked in at the door
that we slip on.

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Forgiveness

I.

I can only imagine it.

You ask me for it —
I deny you three times.

The cock crows.
We marry.

I forget
what there is to forgive,

and you forgive, like always, yourself.

II.

I'm there —

I half expect to be killed
by things you have done,

yet live on.

There must be muteness in it —
pain swallowed,
harm choked on,

all this injury cast up in bones and fossil.
Clouds sailed away.
Worlds forgot.

III.

THE TRICK

You would

if you could,
but what if you can't —

the trick is to believe
your own story,

accident is needed for some kinds of change.

IV.

INFINITE NUMBER

I never forgive

and that's how I recognize it.

By what I don't do
and can't, but must,
I know what it is.

Death thinks,
all things do
what they have to

for giving

give up

V.

FORGIVENESS AND LUCK

It's a streak of luck,
a comet that lands
in the middle of what was
and what is
and blots it all out —
it's more than repression,
beyond amnesia:
it's oblivion,

a new world.

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Infanta

For a moment it flashed
through me, I thought I
remembered being someone before now,
the her who was me
hurt, felt,
embedded like a whorl in wood.
The photograph is black and white,
but I know the dress was amber--
she bells out toward me,
her fingers resting against
a cage of satin,
she stands the way I do
already--is that it--
or have I never forgotten how
to stand like her?

If I could just take the fire with me
into the next room I might sleep
and stumble into the black hole
of that photographer's studio,
back into the frame,
a wax doll, head and hands
emerging out of her costume,
like the infanta of Velasquez,
her future already in place,
maids-in-waiting, a dog, the dwarf,
everyone staring into a dream so dense
nothing ever escapes it.

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Insomnia:A Sextet

On Reading Cioran

Leaf caught in a branch of ice,
I am unsleeping,
heroic,
neither dead, nor dreaming,
awake.

I exist when I
don't sleep,
it makes me feel
you there,
me watched.

You think because you
are not God,
I don't know you.

But I've been here as long as you,
I know the territory:
(it's yours and mine) ,
our marriage is
the first map.

II

The Insomnia of Galaxies

is archipelagos
not knowing where they end,
but swirling by each other endlessly,
sleepless
a sea of one accident succeeding another,
moons circling moons,
breath succeeding breath,

sleep, you, sleep, in stillness rest.

III

Virtual Insomnia

Sleepless,
a picture of Giacometti's
Woman Standing stands on the sill,
next to dead roses and a clock.
On a chair, a book propped-open, wide-awake,
shows a woman Utamaro drew once.
Absent-minded,
she sticks a toothpick
through closed lips.

Outside it snows—
who is "it"?
In another room
the weatherman
thinks he knows what whoever is snowing
is going to do with it.
A series of "it"s
underlines the truth—
he doesn't know who snows either,
but streaks the early morning with a stream of empty sound.

IV

Virtual Sleep
In the air over the lake
the big birds fly, wheeling;
they scissor the light,
pattern over pattern, invisible scribbling,
and later,
dive into the trees
for truth.

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Over And Over Tune

You could grow into it,
that sense of living like a dog,
loyal to being on your own in the fur of your skin,
able to exist only for the sake of existing.

Nothing inside your head lasting long enough for you to hold onto,
you watch your own thoughts leap across your own synapses and disappear --
small boats in a wind,
 fliers in all that blue,
 the swish of an arm backed with feathers,
a dress talking in a corner,
 and then poof,
 your mind clean as a dog's,
your body big as the world,
 important with accident --
 blood or a limp, fur and paws.

You swell into survival,
 you take up the whole day,
you're all there is,
 everything else is
not you, is every passing glint, is
 shadows brought to you by wind,
 passing into a bird's cheep, replaced by a
 rabbit skittering across a yard,
a void you yourself fall into.

You could make this beautiful,
 but you don't need to,
living is this fleshy side of the bone,
 going on is this medicinal smell of the sun --
 no dog ever tires of seeing his life

keep showing up at the back door
even as a rotting bone with a bad smell;
feet tottering, he dreams of it,
wakes and licks no matter what.

