

Riff on Six:

## New and Selected Poems

JAMES REISS is the author of four poetry books, the most recent of which, *Ten Thousand Good Mornings*, was nominated for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize. His work has appeared in such places as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*, plus many anthologies, textbooks, and Web sites. He has won numerous national and regional literary awards and grants. He is Professor of English and Editor of Miami University Press in Oxford, Ohio.



# Riff on Six

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

JAMES REISS



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*For Mary Jo*



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*from* The Breathers (1974)



## The Breathers

(Jeffrey Andrew Reiss—October 5, 1969)

In Ohio, where these things happen,  
we had been loving all winter.  
By June you looked down and saw your belly  
was soft as fresh bread.

In Florida, standing on the bathroom  
scales, you were convinced—  
and looked both ways for a full minute before crossing  
Brickell Boulevard.

In Colorado you waited-out summer in a mountain  
cabin, with Dr. Spock,  
your stamps, and my poems in the faint  
8000-foot air.

Listen, he had a perfect body,  
right down to his testicles, which I counted.  
The morning he dropped from your womb, all rosy  
as an apple in season, breathing the thick  
fall air of Ohio, we thought good things would happen.

Believe me, Dr. Salter and the nurses were right:  
he was small but feisty—they said he was  
*feisty*. That afternoon in his respirator  
when he urinated it was something to be proud of.  
Cyanotic by evening, he looked like a dark rose.

*Late that night you hear . . .*

Think of the only possible twentieth-century consolations:  
Doris saying it might have been better this way;  
think of brain damage, car crashes, dead soldiers.  
Better seventeen hours than eighteen, twenty years  
of half-life in Ohio where nothing happens.

*Late that night you hear them  
in the . . .*

For, after all, we are young, traveling  
at full speed into the bull's eye of the atom.  
There's a Pepsi and hot dog stand in that bull's eye,  
and babies of the future dancing around us.  
Listen, the air is thick with our cries!

*Late that night you hear them  
in the nursery, the breathers.  
Their tiny lungs go in and out like the air  
bladder on an oxygen tank  
or the rhythm of sex.  
Asleep, your arms shoot towards that target  
with a stretch that lifts you like a zombie,  
wakes you to the deafening breathers.*

*And now you see them crawling  
rings around your bed, in blankets,  
buntings, preemies in incubators circling  
on casters, a few with cleft palates, heart trouble,  
all feistily breathing, crawling  
away from your rigidly outstretched arms—  
breathing, robbing the air.*

## The Green Tree

Ever since my daughters started to walk  
I have had increasing difficulty with my eyes.  
I remember the day Wendy took her first steps, when  
she said “bamboo” and waddled over to pat the rusty bumper

of a truck, I could barely make out the writing  
scrawled in dirt on the trailer and had trouble focusing  
as she stepped into its shadow.

The morning in Maine when she raced down the beach

and splashed into the ocean before I could reach her,  
I actually mistook her for another little girl in pink  
whom—I am sorry to say—I began leading slowly out of the  
water.

Then there is Jill: when she first walked I remember

looking at her and thinking, “I am a camera fading back, back.”  
Years later when she would go rollerskating with Wendy  
my eyes were so bad I could no longer tell  
where the sidewalks left off and my daughters began.

By now everything has faded into fine print. I  
have been to a doctor who says he is also troubled,  
but has sons. My only son died one day after  
birth, weighing two pounds. His name was

Jeffrey, but I have always preferred to call him “Under-the-Earth”  
or, especially on rainy days, “Under-the-Sod.” In fact,  
sometimes I catch myself repeating these words: “My only son,  
Under-the-Sod, is playing over there by the green tree.”

## The Blue Snow

Right now, somewhere, someone is thinking of you.  
Lifting her arms into the summer  
evening, or folding a letter in a small room,  
someone is thinking your name and quietly saying:

“You came into my life on the 23rd  
after dinner, when light fell through the window so starkly  
you said it reminded you of a Japanese painting  
called The Blue Snow, and I laughed, thinking,

who is this man who talks like a poet?”  
Now, while it is still light, someone  
is stepping out of her dress and thinking:  
“I will turn off every light in this house

and lie down naked in front of my mirror till dawn,  
then go to the window with the early morning sun on my  
breasts—  
waiting for you who will never come by, you  
who have forgotten what it is to be lonely.”

## The Post Card

The summer Barbara gave birth I received a post card from someone I'd never heard of, Mrs. Sidney Burns, postmarked August 4<sup>th</sup> from someplace I'd never heard of in Iowa.

In a shaky third-grade script these words were penciled:

“have bin thinkin of you how do you like all this winter  
now you think of me once in a wile mr. reece what will  
become of the ice house

mrs. sidney burns”

On the back a cheap imitation of a Currier and Ives Christmas scene: by a tiny road a gingerbread farmhouse in the snow with long icicles hanging from the roof over the windows and the faintest outline of a woman's face in one window, behind the curtain of icicles, as though someone had penciled it in and then decided to erase it.

## People in Sunlight

A man and a woman are sitting  
on an overstuffed sofa  
in a room overflowing with sunlight—  
she in a black bikini,

he in a soldier's uniform.  
He takes off his cap and says her husband  
was a good soldier.  
She crosses her legs and says that may be

true as the sky is blue.  
He unpins a miniature flag from his sleeve  
and presents her with it.  
Sunlight catches the stripes, tossing

them all over the rug like spilled coffee.  
Sunlight catches the coffee  
table off-guard, tossing  
it back in their faces.

She touches her lips to the flag  
and says she's hungry.  
He fiddles with his buttons  
and says nothing.

She unbuttons her bikini and stands  
in a block of sunlight, grinning.  
He grins, too; it is a beautiful day,  
the War is almost over.