

**Classic Poetry Series**

**James Reiss**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2012

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

# James Reiss(11 July 1941 -)

James Reiss is an American poet.

## <b>Biography</b>

James Reiss (pronounced "Reese") grew up in the Washington Heights section of New York City and in northern New Jersey. He earned his B.A. and his M.A. in English from the University of Chicago.

His poems have appeared in various magazines, including The Atlantic, Esquire, The Nation, The New Republic, The New Yorker, Poetry, Slate and Virginia Quarterly Review.

He has won grants from the Creative Artists Public Service Program of the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council. He has received awards from, among others, the Academy of American Poets, the Poetry Society of America, the Pushcart Press and the Unterberg Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y in New York City. From 1971-1974 he was a regular poetry critic for The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1977 he won first prize in New York's Big Apple Bicentennial Poetry Contest. He won four annual Zeitfunk awards for his reviewing, in 2007-2010, from the Public Radio Exchange. In 1975-76 he taught as poet-in-residence at Queens College, CUNY.

He is Emeritus Professor of English and Founding Editor of Miami University Press at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where his students, among others, were Rita Dove and Adrienne Miller.

He has two married daughters, Heather and Crystal by his first wife, Barbara Eve Miller (née Klevs). His second wife, Mary Jo McMillin, wrote Mary Jo's Cuisine: A Cookbook (2007). He lives in the Chicago area.

## <b>Grants/awards (selected)</b>

Featured Illinois Author, Willow Review, spring 2012.

Zeitfunk Awards for Reviewing, The Public Radio Exchange, 2007-2010.

Helen & Laura Krout Memorial Ohioana Poetry Award, 2005.

Pulitzer Prize nomination, Ten Thousand Good Mornings, 2002.

Harriet Monroe Award, University of Chicago, judge, 1996.

Pushcart Prize, "A Rented House in the Country" (poem), 1996.

Dorland Mountain Arts Colony Fellow, Temecula, California:1991, 1993, 1999;  
admissions committee jury  
member (writing): 1994-2004.  
Poetry Society of America annual Lucille Medwick Award, 1989; annual Consuelo  
Ford Award, 1974.  
New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, 1987-88.  
College English Association of Ohio: Nancy Dasher Book Award for Express,  
1984.  
Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist grants: 1980, 1981.  
Big Apple Bicentennial Poetry Award, first prize, New York City, 1977.  
MacDowell Colony Fellowships, Peterborough, New Hampshire: 1970, 1974,  
1976, 1977.  
Bread Loaf Fellowship, Breadloaf Writers Conference, Middlebury, Vermont, 1975.  
CAPS Awards (Creative Artists Public Service, New York State Council on the  
Arts): 1975-76; 1978-79.  
Discovery Award, The Unterberg Poetry Center, 92nd Street Y, New York,1974.  
National Endowment for the Arts Individual Writing Fellowship, 1974-75.  
National Book Award Nomination, *The Breathers*, 1974.  
Two Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards, 1974.  
Academy of American Poets first prizes, University of Chicago, 1960, 1962.

# ¿habla Usted Español?

¿Habla Usted Español?

The Spanish expression Cuando yo era muchacho may be translated: when I was a boy, as, for example, 'When I was a boy I wanted to be a train driver, ' or 'When I was a boy I was completely unaware of the flimsy orchid of life.'

It is the kind of expression found in textbooks of the blue breeze and is more useful than expressions like 'Please put the bananas on the table, Maria, '

or 'Take it easy is the motto of the happy-go-lucky Mexican.'

When I was a boy the sun was a horse.

When I was a boy I sang 'Rum and Coca-Cola.'

When I was a boy my father told me the mountains were the earth's sombreros.

James Reiss

# Brothers

Eighteen years you beat me over the head  
with the butt end of our brotherhood.

So where are you now, Mr. Top  
Dog on the Bunk Bed, Mr. Big  
Back on the High School Football Team?

You hauled ass out of that town  
with its flimsy goalposts.  
Now you're down there with your Dead  
Sea, your Jerusalem, busy  
with the same old border disputes

that sparked our earliest fist fights.  
Israel is just another locked toy  
closet on your side of the bedroom, split  
by electric train tracks. It's as if  
you never left home at all: Yesterday

in a bar in Washington Heights  
I saw a man who could have been you.  
The Jets were playing the Steelers with two  
downs to go, and in the icy  
lightshow of smoke

he lifted a pitcher of beer  
and swilled it just as the screen  
blazed red with an ad for Gillette.  
And I thought, Here is my blood brother  
whose only gifts to me were kicks

in the teeth, his cast-off comic books,  
and worst of all, wrapped, sharpened  
for a lifetime,  
the perfect razor of my rage.

James Reiss

# Crystal

Crystal

A man wets his forefinger with his tongue and holds  
up a perfect water glass, empty and glistening.  
He is sitting at a table in a large  
hall with other men in identical blue

blazers with eagle medallions over their breast pockets.  
Now the first man fingers the glass  
rim, tentatively, as if it were jagged-edged.  
And now he strokes it clockwise, slowly, stopping

to wet his finger again and again, like an old  
man paging through a book—until the glass  
comes to life with a thin, high whine like nothing  
he has ever heard, and the others look up in amazement, catching

on, holding up their glasses, too, wetting and stroking  
them clockwise like ice skaters in unison.  
All the glasses are coming to life now; their throats are  
slowly catching fire, glistening with a thinner,

higher whine than any bird. It is like a pitch  
pipe with wings. It is something like the music each  
man heard when he stepped outside at night  
for the first time alone as a boy. Then

there was nothing in the sky but stars and music.  
And the sky was like glass.

James Reiss

# Cycle

Cycle

What why when where who  
I crush my wedding glass beneath my shoe

In with from to at  
I kiss my bride & cry Jehoshaphat

Five three four two one □  
I father daughters & entomb a son □

Minsk Flint Perth Seoul Rome  
I travel far to find myself at home

Large squat thin fat small  
I greet a stranger in a shopping mall □

Taste touch smell hear see  
I lose my wife my gentle Melanie

I take my life & shake it by the hair  
Who what why when where

James Reiss

# How Now Brown Cow

was what we said back in New Jersey  
when it was cool to like Ike and skip school

though truthfully brown Jersey cows  
were outnumbered by black-and-white Holsteins

north of Teaneck when whole milk said moo  
to rickety slogans that skinny was chic.

Nah, the Garden State never kowtowed  
to low fat before Twiggy got famous

& Secaucus's pig farms shut down so factory  
outlets could oink where hogs used to stink.

Strip malls built on landfill had not yet replaced  
the acres of undrained salt flats

that sprouted with cattails like wow.  
In Woodcliff Lake where he lived up the street

Yogi Berra joked, I wanna go to the bat room.  
We didn't know if he meant Louisville Sluggers

or he needed to go to the john, but we knew  
he was speaking in tongues & we said, Holy cow.

James Reiss

# My Daughters In New York

What streets, what taxis transport them  
over bridges & speed bumps-my daughters swift

in pursuit of union? What suitors amuse them, what mazes  
of avenues tilt & confuse them as pleasure, that pinball

goes bouncing off light posts & lands in a pothole,  
only to pop up & roll in the gutter? What footloose new

freedoms allow them to plow through all stop signs,  
careenng at corners, hell-bent for the road to blaze straight?

It's 10 P.M. in the boonies. My children, I'm thinking  
you're thinking your children are waiting

for you to conceive them while you're in a snarl  
with my sons-in-law-to-be who want also to be

amazing explorers beguiled by these reckless night rides  
that may God willing give way to ten thousand good mornings!

James Reiss

# People In Sunlight

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.

James Reiss

# Squeezebox

## SQUEEZEBOX

You stretched its bellows to the limit without ripping  
the fabric. So what if you weren't the guy on TV  
who touched off tremolos by twitching his instrument  
in time with Ed Sullivan's handclaps.  
You pumped yours like a concertina, tight  
in your shoulder straps, pounding the keyboard.

You took lessons from Mr. Merino, who called  
your accordion an "ax." He taught you jazz  
syncopations, scales you muffed, & once,  
while he stood behind you fingering your ribs,  
the rhythm of a man in love with boys.

So what if you weren't the crush he imagined,  
performing in pigeon piazzas  
where tourists noshed on prosciutto.  
Flawless from his tap shoes to his toupee,  
as he played "Sorrento" & "Lady of Spain,"  
he pressed black buttons, forming long-lost chords.

James Reiss

# The Blue Snow

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."

James Reiss

# The Breathers

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.□

James Reiss