

Poetry Series

Max Reif
- poems -

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Max Reif(1948)

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BECOMING A POET

In college I never understood poetry. Certain distant acquaintances walked around in what appeared to be a kind of haze. People spoke of them, always with a kind of awe, as poets.

I didn't grasp the poetry, but I wanted the awe. I wanted to be one of the people spoken of that way!

Whether most poets begin with such vague, crass aspirations, I don't know. Most things that are worthwhile in my life, though, have begun with some form of longing, some perception of their absence.

My first year at Northwestern University I attended some poetry readings. Invariably I would walk into the appointed room to find an anxious, anemic-looking man (never a woman) in a suit, standing before a few rows of people sitting in desks. He would proceed to mutter words I found as arcane as medieval spells.

One night in the spring, though, Allen Ginsburg came to campus. Several thousand people jammed into an auditorium to hear him. I soon grasped why. You could actually understand what he was talking about! He chanted about the Vietnam war, the moral and psychic state of America, his own sexuality—intimate matters that affected everyone there. Ginsburg was an event as much as a poet, but he showed me that it is possible to use words in ways that are intense and close to home.

My first 'real' poem (as opposed to some earlier efforts in which I tried to *sound* like a poet) came out of me when I was home from college in the summer of 1968. I was driving through an area of St. Louis, Missouri that a few years earlier had been called Gaslight Square—a nationally-known neighborhood of bistros and beatnik coffeehouses that is even mentioned by Kerouac in ON THE ROAD.

In the mid-'60s, as I've heard it, a tourist was murdered in the area, and people just stopped going. As I drove past in '68, Olive Street looked like a

neighborhood in a bombed-out city. I was suddenly taken up in feelings of the transience of all earthly things, and a poem, *already written* by inner muses, poured out of me. All I remember of it is that Gaslight Square became a symbol of a lost Mother, or Great Mother. One line of the poem went: 'since your great hip shook itself to sleep.'

That almost mystical sort of sequence, resulting in a poem, repeated itself several times that summer. I became addicted to the creative process, and remain so, 38 years later. I suffer acutely when, as sometimes happens, the process is blocked.

It was not until 1976, though, when I was 28, after a very deep depression that culminated in a dramatic spiritual awakening, that 'the gift' of poetic utterance began to flow out of me in a steady stream — sometimes, even, in a mighty torrent! During one period in the '80s, poetry poured out so prolifically that I could scarcely drive. At every red light, a line would come into my head. I'd pick up my pen and notebook. By the time I'd jotted down the line, the driver behind me was likely to be honking. Poets will understand this.

2.

The Poetry Tavern page on my website ([link](#))

My primary contemporary influence, though, has been Francis Brabazon, a recent Australian poet whose subject was also love and longing for God. Much of my poetry has been inspired by and devoted to Meher Baba, of whom Brabazon was a disciple, as the embodiment, in my experience, of the spiritual ideal in our time.

3. Preface To My First Book of Poems

(a 'chapbook', I guess they call it now)

Whatever my 'inner literary critic' may say today, *YOUNG MAN GONE WEST* (now at

Those were the days when I was discovering self-help groups. My daily routine consisted of going to meetings, exploring the city, writing, and for a time, being a street minstrel at the big, new outdoor mall downtown.

The minstrel days ended when the weather turned. An angel whispered in my

ear a possible new project: 'Put a book of poems together! '

I realized a number of my recent efforts would work together and kept writing until the same angel said, 'This much is the book.'

Then came the 'high tech' part.

High tech meant, in those days, taking busses and trudging repeatedly in blizzards to Kinko's, the new little shop near the university where you could make copies, collate, and even create a 'book cover' out of colored card stock. There was no other way to put my book together except to make the lengthy journey again and again from my apartment on Colfax Street.

I also needed a work space for writing and editing, and set about the hopeless task-given my paltry means-of finding an 'office' to rent. Checking the bulletin board at Rainbow Foods, the 'new age' grocery store around the corner, was a good beginning.

Miraculously, I soon stumbled upon an old 5-story building that was owned by a progressive proprietor who rented space cheaply to the Sierra Club and various other liberal organizations. Incredibly, a tiny room was available for \$35 a month! Even I could afford that!

I bought a used desk and somehow lugged it up the freight elevator. Tipping it on its end, I pulled it through the office door.

By now, YOUNG MAN GONE WEST was almost finished. A little more writing and a couple more trips to Kinkos, and I was riding home on the bus cradling fifty copies of my baby in my lap. The first copies had gold covers. They felt like pure gold.

I brought the books back to the office. The late November evening was cold, windy, and delicious. Deep snow lay on the ground. As I entered the building, a man about my age was walking in the hall.

'What have you got there? ' he asked.

'A book of poetry I just finished writing! ' I said proudly, holding up my beautiful cover.

'Wow! ' he said. 'May I read it? '

'Sure! ' I told him. 'Here, you can have a copy.'

'That's so kind of you. Will you autograph it? ' he asked.

Soon I was walking toward my own little space, eager to make a cup of tea and go over YOUNG MAN GONE WEST one more time. I pulled my keychain from my pocket. It was heavy with keys to several churches I opened each week for self-help meetings

Closing the door behind me and putting the books down on the desk, I suddenly felt completely naked, as if my entire psyche was getting x-rayed.

'What could be making me feel this way? ' I wondered. As far as I knew, I was completely alone and had been filled with nothing but expansive feelings.

Then I knew. The young man downstairs had opened his book and was reading. He was reading my soul. That was what poetry was: the book of one's soul, shared.

'But this book only skims the surface of what I have to say! ' I thought, savoring this delicious taste of the writer's secret life.

(.....16sept) My Argument With Grammar

Nature's conjunctions are invisible,
<i>everything's</i> conjoined, and language
only a dimwitted mimic
running behind.

Adjectives, adverbs stroll
down the street not modifying,
but glued into the very atoms of nouns,

and nouns themselves
are verbs, of course,
for everything passes.

Where is the prepositional phrase,
'in the room? ' I don't see it
hanging around the neck
of the man standing over there.

Is there a complete sentence
anywhere <i>in vivo</i>?
Maybe, but then only one!

Can anything be misspelled there?

I come up
from my notebook frustrated.
The grammar of Existence
can't be caged.

Max Reif

(.....14sept1) Infusion

I weep at the purity of a little girl
carrying a cup of hot chocolate
carefully across the room.

Her face becomes the face
of all the children I have known.

You need not despair, Humanity.
We speak of making
the world safe for children,
but it is children
who make the world safe for us,

their infusion of innocence
ever freshening our world,

saving it
from the senility and stagnation
of our dark dreams.

Max Reif

(.....14sept2) Portrait: Two Men

The two men
walk together like overgrown boys,
a jaunty humor jingling between them.

One of them dwarfs the other.
The smaller, compact man
carries a rolled up blueprint
under his arm.
The other is big and athletic.

Are they brothers?
The are like octaves of the same song,
point counterpoint, music
walking nonchalantly along.

Max Reif

(.....14sept3) The Flow Of Time

The days leapfrog
over one another
to get to the end of the week.

This is better
than when the days
were sunk in quicksand
and could scarcely move.

But how do you get
the days to
just stand still
and relax?

Max Reif

(.....14sept4) Parable

A stern figure
blocked my way,
said, 'Not this path.'

I went back
to my old rounds,
pick and shovel in the fields
another year.

The hopeless, invisible
burden remained on my shoulders.
I stole away again
and returned to the path.
Again the stern figure.
Again I went back
and picked up my tools.

Another year of dim
purgatory, a gray time
with no prospect of sun.

Again I took leave
and walked to the path.
The stern figure
admonished yet again,

but my feet
would not go back
to the fields of the hopeless,

and I kept walking
along the unknown path.

Max Reif

(.....14sept5) The Unities

Something deep inside us
demands the unities.

I've found a grotto, winding back
behind a public park,
mossgrown sidewalk curving
along an ivy-covered, wooded creek.

For all I know,
this could be virgin jungle.
My mind begins to quiet down,
to come in for a landing

until a plastic bag,
a strip of cellophane, and a section
of newspaper, strewn along a hollow

slam me back.
They don't belong,
they don't belong!

Max Reif

(.....11sept) **Ascent**

Up the dusty path,
up the steep grade,
up and up,
turning around every so often
to look below
at the great valleys and hills
getting smaller and smaller,

and the little colonies of homes,
a thousand, two thousand
clustered in the valleys
and up onto the hills,
red-roofed villas and *haciendas*
and smooth, grey, mansions,

and more coming into view
the higher the climb,

and the heart faintly sickened
that even in the ascent
there is no way to get away,
no Jacob's Ladder any more
to escape the human sprawl,

no way to capture the prize of climbing,
the emptiness that thrills the heart,
the scanning of a landscape
without a trace of human alteration,

the timeless Somethingj
that renews the spirit —
the glimpse in Nature
of a face that is not our face,

and so the prophet came back
and said unto the people,
'I'm sorry, but I could not get away.'

(.....11sept2) **September 11,2007**

The sun does not seem to get discouraged,
it has risen and set more than 2,000 times
since that day the world we knew ended,

when I turned on the radio and the announcer
seemed to be narrating some latter-day 'War of the Worlds'
or playing old tapes of the '93 World Trade Center bombing
on its anniversary, but then listening more I learned

that the unthinkable had happened,
the lovely, twin needle-spires I used to gaze on,
silvered by the sun, from a hill on Staten Island,
in whose bowels I used to catch
the train to New Jersey,

those mighty, lovely objects
were gone forever,
blasted towers of the tarot,
and inside, a towering sense
of the stability of the world I lived in
crashed and fell in mirrored response.

Since then, the Asian tsunami,
the end of New Orleans as we knew it,
genocide in Darfur

and yet somehow my world goes on,
habits reconstitute themselves,
even the sense of the ordinary
survived and inconspicuously
returned one day
and is looking at me now
from across the table,

for the mind and senses
are not adequate to all this

Max Reif

(.....11sept3) The Real Revolution

The real Revolution
would be to institutionalize
the Eternal Present,

ending the hemorrhage
of emigration into the unreal
lands of past and future,

but only the brave
risk hurling their bodies
under the blinding sword
of the Glance of every moment
looking out from every pair of eyes
in the Procession of all beings down every street,

only the brave
can be ripe wheat dancing in the breeze
as the scythe of time
harvests them every NOW and NOW and NOW,

only the brave
become a grateful moth,
the crisp sound of its extinction
in each second's brief blaze
punctuated only
by the sound of its laughter,

only the brave metamorphasize
from rat in maze
to lover in Garden,

inferno-to-Paradise
simply an inversion of the eyes,
a reversal of attitude,

and inferno
is Mother
to the Divine

(.....9 Sept) A Hymn To The Earth

1.

Feet on soft earth feel different.
My feet on asphalt starve.
A walk along a concrete
sidewalk may bring
refreshment through the eyes
and breezes to kiss skin,
but underneath the feet,
under the feet
it's like a coffin lid.

I have learned
that our feet breathe,
our feet see,
our feet are organs
like our hearts and lungs.
We have roots like great trees,
that go down deep,
maybe to the center of the Earth.

2.

Sitting at a table indoors,
I can't write a hymn to you, Earth.
My mind becomes a satellite
orbiting disembodied,
separated from me
by miles of thick darkness,
sends back messages
showing there's no life out there.

And yet for wilderness,
sometimes I just
walk out the door —
a tree, a park, a strip of grass,
and I've tasted
Nature's Medicine.

3.

Even cities,

roads and buildings
all rest upon you, Earth.

In mercy you sustain us
through the miracle
of your fertility.
Your soil is a gift
hand-crafted for us
through the ages.

Children who have squandered
your bounty, may we grow up now
and finally learn
the sacrament of living
on your body
with respect.

Max Reif

(.....31aug) Stamps

My favorite one, from Italy,
showed a woman
with a whole, walled city
atop her head.

Then there were the triangles:
Finnish bicycle racers,
Angolan cheetahs with gleaming eyes,
Croatian birds — how I loved
to whisper that word, 'Croatia'!

The Russians, too, had bike racers,
leaning intensely forward,
and many men
with long, white beards.

I learned strange words
like '*Magyar*' and '*Norge*',
same as the brand
of refrigerators
Dad sold at his store,

and *Espana*, the lovely
name of a place whose stamps
were mostly filled up
with the big head
of a man named Franco,
of which I had red, orange,
brown and violet versions,
some cancelled, some brand new.

And Hitler. Grandpa made
me cross his picture out
in all the stamps of him
with *Deutsches-Reich* at the bottom,
but not the small, square ones
of grey, round-faced
general von Hindenburg.

Stamps were an absolute
democracy, the tiny
republic of San Marino
equal to the great
United States.

And the Cape of Good Hope,
the Cape of Good Hope!
I learned of it from a stamp,
and still hope to round it some day.

Once, a distant cousin
in the diplomatic corps
wrote to us from Tanganyika.
Mother helped me steam
the orange stamp off
after she'd read the note..
I felt I'd been given
a piece of the land itself.

I wrote the President of Pakistan,
asking whether the capital
was Lahore or Rawalpindi,
and I swear, he wrote me back
in his own hand, 'Rawalpindi',

and Kwame Nkruma, father
of the new country, Ghana,
I wrote him too,
feeling indignant
when he never replied.

The world seemed simpler then.
Oh God, I want that world!

Max Reif

(.....Sept4) Wrestling Match, 3 Pm

At 3 o'clock this afternoon
<i>right here in this ring</i>,
the poet will be wrestling
with his editor
until one of them
is pinned to the mat.

Wrestling perhaps not
for the poem's soul,
which both profess to believe in,
but for its clothing.

The editor sees
when a button is missing,
a vest does not
quite match the shirt.

The poet just looks
and cries 'My baby! '
He can't even glance
at the poem
without falling
forward to embrace it.

Can we say that the poet
is the mother of the poem,
the editor its dad,
showing it how
to pull a collar up
to survive in a difficult world?

Even so, they just can't agree
what's best for the poem,
so they're going to fight it out —

circling each other in the ring,
the editor with his tough love,
the poet, heart on a sleeve.

(.....22aug) In The Library

I come here not for renewal
of my books, but of myself.

The library
is a temple of silence
in a world of noise.

In silence I can think.
In silence I can nurture
the small one within me
in his fetal position,
eyes closed, trusting
to float in the dark
amniotic fluid,

as gravity-free
as an astronaut
in that other dark womb.

This space is not
that space, though.

Here, the small one
floats, trusts, relaxes,
lets himself go
where the currents take him,
the dark, friendly currents.

He does not need to think.
Allowed to forget,
he begins
to remember.

Max Reif

(.....26aug3) Talking Ambition

I got up this morning and the dim
pink in the distant sky
made the drooping willow tree
some unknown color, as the world,
bathed in mystery, slowly, drowsily awoke,

and I set out upon its pathways
in my car, following a winding back road
that led to another road,
that led to many others, so you know
I could have wound up *anywhere*.

Gazing out at the pink sky
and the willow and the hills beyond,
I saw no limits to joy
except the one thought:
'I've got to go back to work soon! '
That's after these four days off,
four unbounded days to explore,

but come Thursday I run into a wall,
faraway as yet, but you know how these things are,
limits arrive speeding down time's freeway,

and I thought, 'If only
I were making my living as an author,
I could dream beautiful dreams
and be given livelihood,

and 'work' would not be work,
any more than a fountain
works to bring forth waters,

and I would work in the morning,
many hours, and then walk around
among the people and animal and plants,
all lovable figures in God's great Dream,

and I can see myself as a fountain of joy,

as happy as a person can be,
a fountain whose waters give life and health
and show the way
to the Source of water

Max Reif

(.....27aug) Myth Poem

My sleeping body is a field lying fallow,
dark loam of flesh folded in on itself,
imbibing mysteries. When I rise,

I become a tall field of corn stalks
dancing under the sun,
waving yellow tassles.

I open my green arms to the hungry.
They receive of my hidden gold, and live,

and I return to lie down
again in the dreaming earth.

Max Reif

(.....Aug26) The River Of Ordinary Moments

Because living is a river of ordinary moments,
each moment connected to the next,
there is nowhere we can go to escape
from our fate which is to merge
every swell of the stream
back into the ordinary,

and all I can hope for is that gentle, light
sense of well-being as my little canoe bobs
in the current of everyday,
sailing downstream, ever downstream.

I am stunned by the beauty of the ordinary,
so that sometimes the ordinary seems mis-named, and yet
it is ordinary because it is quiet with no fanfare:

a man picking his way through the oranges
at the farmer's market,
a woman taking a leisurely bath,
a child playing in the grass in the back yard,
all the people in a street just walking.

No one is enthroned above every one else,
this river is absolutely democratic,
every thrill, every intoxication flows on downstream
as does, sooner or later, every sorrow, every loss,
though those are a little harder,
the hole seems to take longer for the waters to fill.

No one is famous to the ordinary,
you can't impress it.
The ordinary is the real wife of every man,
the real husband of every woman.
It is where you return from all your expeditions,
and it is all anyone could ever truly want.

And so today, when I received fulfillment
of a certain small desire I'd had as a poet,
and I felt hands starting to tug at me inside,

trying to take me somewhere,
trying to hoist me on their shoulders
and parade me through the streets,

it was like the dividing was beginning
of everything from everything else.
I felt the walls of 'I' begin to solidify
and separate me from everything,
the way a butterfly feels
sitting on a branch in the sun,
waiting for his wings to dry and chitin to harden
after crawling from his chrysalis,
ready after that to preen and flit and die,

and I reply to those voices, 'No, thank you',
and I say to those tugging hands, 'No, thank you',
I do not want to be
taken from the flow of the ordinary
to any pinnacle or promontory from which
I will only have to climb, or fall, down again,

I do not want to be special in that way,
I want the tick of thoughts in my mind to run out
and the storehouse of thoughts to be emptied
and not replaced by any others,

I want to disappear, disappear
and become that current
that all distinct drops are lost in, and then
the ocean into which all rivers go to die

Max Reif

(.....02aug) In The Waiting Room

It was easy to leave behind
my 'medical procedure'
and my daily life
and enter
the large painting on the wall
of the Wine Country
with its vineyards and poplars,
its mountains and its vast
billowing clouds;

the hard part
was coming back.

Max Reif

(.....July 25) The Message

The cool breeze
has a message
for my skin this morning,

and the waving trees
are cheerleaders
whispering the same thing:

*'You were born to be here!
On the chessboard of the world,
your every step toward Beauty
is already drowned
in Beauty. '*

My skin takes in the message.
to imprint it in my cells,
that they may remember it
like refreshing water

when the hot days
come again.

Max Reif

(.....01july17) Lurching To Be Born

A funny thing happened
on the way to the New Age
around the year 1980,
as the Celestial Seasonings
herb tea company
seemed to be creating
a new world all by itself,
one smelling of chamomile,
peppermint and peach.

Coffee and coca-cola
appeared to be living
on borrowed time

until at the last minute, millions
of people panicked and said,

'Stop! Don't take into extinction
the drink I had after my first kiss,

or the one I could smell
Dad brewing every morning
my first 17 years
as I came downstairs! '

Vision is one thing,
true surrender
quite another.

Max Reif

(.....01july20) In A Minor Key-Letter To Leonard Cohen*

Dear Leonard Cohen,

Strumming and singing
my favorite songs of yours,
all from your first couple albums,

still eases me into
a vantage point
nothing else I know
has ever approached,

a place in my heart
nothing else has reached.

Yes, it is salted with tears,
but the tears
make everything green there
shine with unearthly beauty,
and reveal somehow the holiness
of all the lost souls.

I have no clue
by what alchemy
you are able
to sing sorrow

in a way that brings
such a stillness,
such a sense of beauty,
if not joy.

*note: for anyone curious (I already got one e-mail query, and I'm happy to share) , my 'top 6' are:

'A Bunch Of Lonesome Heroes'
'Seems So Long Ago, Nancy'

'So Long, Marianne'
'Stories of the Street'
'Stranger Song' and
'Story of Isaac'...

I think there's no rhyme or reason in it, or thyme either, which is what I typed originally, except personal experience and associations.

Max Reif

(.....12aug3)

Google Maps To My Poems

You have to get
from point A
to point B
in my *mind*

without taking
a wrong turn,

that's not
as easy
as it may sound,

a single word
can throw you off

if you take
a meaning
I don't intend
or slide
off on a slippery
patch of syntax.

I comb over poems
again and again looking
for the dead-end
or the likely wrong turn
or the roadblocks

because I know most of you
won't go on
if you come to
a log or a dead cow
in the road
of my poem,

you'll just
start reading
someone else.

How long do I have
to make
an impression
on you,
30 seconds,
the way those books
at Kinkos say it is
with a job interview?

So I have
to make sure
my syntax
is a throughway
and then

I have to get a grant
to boost the infrastructure
of my poem,
add a few lanes
(subtly,
NOT LIKE THIS!)

so you not only won't
have to puzzle
it out too much,

but it'll keep you
absolutely riveted

i give up

Max Reif

(.....12aug5) The Poet Defends His Integrity In A Dream

I'm at a high school,
or more likely the
community college,

and I'm part of the community,
though whether as teacher
or artist-in-residence or hanger-on
isn't made clear in the dream.

One day as I'm standing
out in a large field,
I see a delegation
of three professors from the English Department
on their way to talk to me. One
is a woman who mentored me once,
and I feel some closeness toward her.

They wear smiles,
but it's clear from the get-go
that their purpose is to ask me
to tone down my behavior and writing.

Before they've even finished asking,
I'm aware that they're so out of line
that the only way to 'speak truth to power'
in this case is to totally refuse
to even dignify their request
with any logical response.

In a minute I'm down on the ground
in just my underpants in front of them,
pounding my fists as a crowd gathers,
shouting, *'Don't take away
my poems! I need my poems!'*
like a child having a tantrum.

In the next scene, I'm in the school office,

sober with notebook in hand,
the clowning at an end,
having established its point,

an existential statement
celebrating freedom of expression,
consciously enacted for the students
for whom I know I'm a role model.

I wake from the dream as energized
as if I'd won the Pulitzer Prize.

Max Reif

(.....16aug) God

God is not
a dog
whom we
can train

to come
at our
command.

Max Reif

(.....July28) Poetic Husbandry

These herds
of words
need a shepherd —

not
A warden,
but a kind
and watchful eye.

They're fluttery
and as easily influenced
as adolescents.

They sometimes run in packs
with no idea where they're going.

The shepherd's eye,
looking out from a silent center,
helps remind them
of their origins,

of their birthplace
in the brilliance
of the Sun.

Max Reif

(.....01july13) Seal Beach Pier

1. The Public Pier

Here beyond the screaming beach,
the volleyball and surfers,
the fishers try
to pull something
alive from the veiled
depths, and some succeed.

Fearless pre-teens
leap off the railing,
then bob like seals
amid the light beams
dancing on the green surface.

Ruby's Diner, at the far end,
half a mile toward Catalina,
gets \$8 a cheeseburger.
and the trash boat
gurgling away from its dock
seems to signify that some,
at least, have taken that bait.

We're neither land nor sea here,
neither fish nor fowl,
though both fish and fowl
are all around us
out on this
island in the sky,
this bridge
to nowhere
and everywhere

2. The Poets' Pier

The poets line the pier,
pens dangling out
over the green depths.
Poker-faced, they stand

or sit on benches.
Every now and then
a line tugs,
a pen dips,
a poet
pulls something up
and over the rail.

Shining, exotic,
the poem flops on the deck.
The poet smiles,
and the others,
not so fortunate
yet today,
keep their watch
out toward the sea.

Max Reif

(.....12aug1) Homage To Eugene O'Neill

On my walk today I came upon
this narrow park along the street,
wild trees and shrubs pressing in
from a creek on the other side.

At intervals on the brick-lined walk-way
stand waist-high bronze pedestals,
an open book atop each one
glassed over for protection

depicting the life
of my nation's greatest dramatist,
who created his finest work
a few miles from this spot.

Suddenly, from out of the great
suburbanization of America,
there came a sense of *place*—
all spots *not* interchangeable—

of ground hallowed, in this land
that so few saints have trod,
by O'Neill's bleeding
steps toward truth.

With gratitude I wiped
the dust from those glass pages,
and felt his struggles
validate my own.

Max Reif

(.....17aug) A Writer's Prayer

Beloved God,

The one field
I know how to plow
is the field of the blank page.

For You
may I plow these fields
and leave them furrowed and sown
with words and feelings and ideas,

and from these pages
may thousands of flowers bloom.
May the fruit form and grow ripe.
Let me be fed,

and feed others with the surplus,
and may great trees grow,
giving shade to many.

I offer this,
today's small harvest,
to You.

May it lead
to an Abundance
that will serve You well.

Amen

Max Reif

(.....July 30) Philosophical Rant

1.

Let us assume
we're all doing our best
as we understand it,

and even those who feel
they can put one over
on Existence,

the best *they* can do
is proceed from that assumption
until they have to abandon it
as a skeleton that doesn't support
the the weight of the meat
of real life.

Our best then includes
the possibility of being stuck,
spinning metaphysical
wheels for a long time,

because we are all complex
blends of qualities and may not
have a particular
tool in our toolbox.

We're all such strange birds!
Everyone's heard about
the Nazi officers
who would weep at romantic music,

or there might be
a shy person
with the inner
strength of a lion,
and no way to release it
except through heroic endurance.

Given all this,

I'm thinking about repetition:

insanity, say my 12-step friends,
is doing the same thing
and expecting different results.

But do we ever really
do the same thing twice?
And maybe doing the same thing
on a *cloudy* day
will bring a different outcome.

Then there's the possibility
that each apparent repetition
digs down a little deeper
into the bedrock of what's there.

I don't know
about any of this:
'living out' a problem *means*
you haven't a clue.

2.

You might say
this poem is my philosophy,
and this part is the footnote.

I remember when I was young,
how most of the world
seemed to believe
you live a few decades,
maybe six or seven, then die
and face Eternal Judgment,

and so it followed
that you'd better get it right!

I'm stunned every time I realize
many people still believe all that,
still wear that tight,
tight collar on their lives.

There are reasons
for that, too,

but what a relief it was
to learn we are not
one-shot stabs in the dark,

but rivers whose destiny
is to reach the Ocean,

and all the crazy
meanderings,
all our thousands of adventures,
all the times we go to sleep
and wake up in a new body
ready and full of energy
for a whole new round,

the river includes all that,
and its current is
taking us downstream,
and all we really have to do
is relax and let it.

Max Reif

(.....July24) The Partnership

I could say the partnership
begins when my day begins,
but in fact it's as 24/7
as an all-night diner.

I have partners who made
the mattress and the bed
my body rests on at night,
and some of my partners in China
wove the pajamas I wear.

Partners worked
to create the toothbrush
and the shaver
I greet the morning with
while looking in the mirror,
and the mirror itself,

and of course the computer
I check in with
was a global affair
in design and manufacture.

For breakfast I cook
the eggs a farmer gathered
and a trucker transported
to the supermarket, and the oatmeal
grown somewhere in the Midwest
and processed here in California,
and I have a banana picked a few days ago
by my campanero
partners in Central America.

A little later,
I get in my Mazada,
and I need not describe
the partnership of minds and bodies,
in time and space,
it took the human spirit

to put me behind the wheel —
and all that's before 10 AM.

A profound thank you
to all my unseen partners,
who sustain me
every minute of the day and night,
and a wish
that my own contribution
somehow pulls my weight.

Max Reif

(....02aug)

As My Recovery Progresses

A little while ago
I came down to the computer
in the early morning light,
strong as a lumberjack
in a forest of redwoods,

read a few poems,
and in the shadow
of my conscious mind
felt the seeds
of something great
beginning to sprout.

Now, after answering
a little correspondence,
I already feel the need
to go back to bed,
and I'm fumbling
through these papers
on my desk

wondering how
you can misplace
a whole epic?

Max Reif

(....July20) The Tree Of Experience, Heavy With Fruit

1.

Experience.

I am heavy
with experiences,
fruits on a tree
whose trunk is thick now.

Memories.

Each fruit
a memory
to bite into,
some sweet,
some bitter.

But what am I doing,
biting into
this tree of life,
instead of *living*?

2.

It is because the fruits
feel heavy now,
and when the fruits are heavy,
a time has come for harvest.

I do not know
what sort of harvest.
The fruit feels heavy
and the air feels close,

and the life
I have gathered
around me now
is hard to live.

But of course, this life
is the stuff of future fruit,

sweet or bitter
as I make it.

3.

The mule,
The mule of my own nature,
whom I need
to hoe these rows of living
is on a sit-down strike
and must be dragged
to work each day.

And so,
before the work
begins anew,
I take time out
to seek the pattern
that made the sweet fruit sweet,
and remember how
the mule joined in.

4.

But I find no pattern, really.

Sometimes the joy
just seemed to flow
with scarce a cause,
the mule as eager as the rest
to celebrate the days.

Other times, the mule
would not cooperate,
or else there was no spot
to even stand upon, on Earth,

until the heat of desperation
brought, at long last,
Answers from the depths.

The sea of time and space
would part, and I
would walk through,

a new man.

5.

That's all I can say.

I have no words of wisdom
beyond, "yes, it can happen."

That does not mean
it will. The past
is safe, now,

I've my stories.
Some are good ones,
even have
a universal application.

But in the Present, the armies
of my weaknesses and strengths
are arrayed
as they have always been,

and I am not
the master of the weaknesses,
or they'd be strengths, as well.

Sometime endurance
is the greatest strength.

Max Reif

(..01july3) Reflections Of A Late Afternoon (Re-Edited)

1.

How is it that a day
begins long and slow,
a world just born
and beginning to unfold

and then,
looking back
from its other end,

we see there's only
a short stump of a thing?

What happened
to all that promise?
Surely

there's as much God
in the molecules of the evening
as in those of the morning.

Something has fled
or been consumed,
and I guess
it was something
in me.

2.

But when a man
devotes his days to building
what he loves

and he feels spent,
he knows all
that's gone out from him
now resides
in the thing he's making

and he can relax
knowing nothing is lost.

Indeed, what lived
only in him
now lives
where all can find it.

3.
And maybe a poet
is building
that kind of home, as well.

Though it's not
in a space
with two-by-fours
and sheet rock, yet

it has windows
and yes, a door,

and you can enter
and leave uplifted.

And because it's not
a landmark on a hill,

maybe it's a little
<i>more</i> magical,
a city
that comes out of the air
fullblown
from these little
black marks on a page.

4.
I do
some of my best work
when I'm exhausted
and think there's nothing left.

And then I rest satisfied
beside the new little structure,
added on to the vast
domicile the spirit
has created

that is nowhere on the earth
but offers refreshment to many.

Max Reif

(..02july3) Hotcakes And Flapjacks

Well, years ago I went down
to MacDonald's in the Embarcadero
in SF for breakfast,
and I read the menu and felt hungry,
but didn't want to just give myself
to the huge, corporate Octopus,

so instead of ordering the Hotcakes
on the menu, I said
'I'll have an order of Flapjacks! '

'Flapjacks?' said the counter guy.
'We don't have Flapjacks!
We just have Hotcakes.'

'Well, I want Flapjacks, ' I said.
'Bring me Flapjacks,
or say goodbye
to my business. Maybe
I should talk
to the Manager.'

The Manager came out.
'May I help you, sir? '
'Yes, I want Flapjacks! I was told
you only have Hotcakes. That's
not what I want.'

He flashed
a Manager's smile.
'One order of Flapjacks
coming up! ' he said.

Max Reif

(.0000001july207) The Failed Juggler's Tale

I've tried to juggle
the world and God
like they were two
balls in my hand,

but I am not
that clever,
or that strong.

Even huge St. Christopher,
the ferryman, could not
bear infant Jesus
across the river on his back,
because that infant carried
the weight of all the world.

One who'd think to juggle
He Who holds
the universe
within His being
is surely mad.

Ah, mad I've been
and mad I am,
mad with desire
and double-vision,

and only Love's precious,
living Light
will ever, ever
set me right.

Max Reif

(.0001june15 07)

Incident At Lambert Field

While waiting
for our bag at the airport,
I vaguely notice a man
wearing a tight, shell necklace,
walking back and forth.
something's a little odd about him,
I'm not quite sure what.

You know how it is
with such waiting. My gaze
surveys the crowd for anything
interesting, then moves
back to the carousel. A little later,

another tableau with this same man:
two women and an old, white-haired fellow,
presumably family members,
have met him. I hear the necklace guy say
he has to be back at 7: 50, and imagine
a scenario: they're going out for dinner
before he travels on.

I turn again to look for our bag,
but in a moment hear
behind me a terrible shriek.

Now the man with the necklace
holds a cell phone to his ear,
screaming 'My God! No, No! '
The others huddle around
and cradle him as he sobs.

As the carousel goes round
in this gray limbo of waiting
the hidden grief of the world
has suddenly come pouring,
twenty feet away.

Everyone's looking

and trying not to. I glance over
at a woman near me. We mirror
concerned expressions, shoulders and arms
raised in question. I want

to go over and embrace the screamer —
torn between that and wanting
a curtain for his privacy.

After he's keened a few minutes,
the ladies trundle him
into a wheelchair and move him
down the hall. The old man
is left standing there. I approach
and ask what happened:

'My son's son
got killed. It was a beach
accident, in Santa Cruz.
He'd just graduated
from high school.'

The grandpa looks off
into the distance, showing
no emotion. I try
to hug him, but succeed
only in patting a shoulder blade.

Then the ladies come back
with another wheelchair,
and I'm left alone,

feeling completely helpless. I notice
that other passenger again.
Our eyes meet. We
approach one another
and embrace.

Max Reif

(.0002june15) The Obituary Page

My friend's former wife,
mother of his kids,
died yesterday,
and this morning

thumbing through the POST,
I came upon her picture
quite by accident,

then that of the father
of a high school classmate.

I could feel my crossing
into the hallowed precinct
of the obituary page,

laminated in sincerity,
resonant with echoes
from the Other World —

that metaphysical
Times Square,
where eventually
you'll come across
everyone you know.

Max Reif

(.01june9 07) The Adventures Of My Poems

1.

My poems have their moods.
Sometimes they feel shy,
tired of the scrutiny of eyes,
tired of being undressed.

They come and snuggle
under me like baby chicks.

Rested, they venture forth again.
Now they *become* eyes,
buttonholing people on corners:
'Pssst—help you see? '

Each one has a mission.
Some reveal the hilarity
in the composition of matter.
Some spread the word
that the sky is falling.
Others announce a shout
of joy everywhere at 10 AM.

What do I really know about my poems?
They come from somewhere
I can't even see.

2.

My poems hang out on the corner.
They go for rides with strangers.
Like any parent I worry.

When they come home for the night,
some tell me where they've been.
Others don't say a word.

There's nothing I can do.
I gave what I could.
Now they're on their own.

3.

Sometimes the poems roost
in a tree outside my window,
making so much noise
I can't sleep at night,
so I can scarcely wait
till fall, when they'll all
fly south.

4.

Once I lost my pen.
Words welled up inside my head
until I looked hydrocephalic.
They started to ferment,
and I walked around dumb
with a big smile on my face.

5.

My poems preen.
They need
to go out in the world
and get a job.
They're big rocks
that need to become sand.

6.

This is a bit off the subject,
but this afternoon I made soup,
feeling tired the whole time.
Ten minutes after I served it
at dinner, everyone
at the table
was asleep.

Max Reif

(001june2 07) Poet's Note To Self

Ah, when I walk in my vision,
a solid world
materializes under my feet.
Words come unbidden
like tame deer from the forest
and resonate to the height of the firmament,
the lowest reaches of the depths.

But the path of mere obligation
becomes so dusty
that first breathing is hard,
then the way is lost,
and finally the world itself
is only a cloud
in which I'm lost.

Max Reif

(004june2 07) In The Temple Of Memory

I speak to you easily,
shadowy figure in my mmeory,
reliving all your picaresque adventures
pulled out as from a volume on a shelf,

dazzled by all the color and the drama,
each episode pulling Light
improbably from the dark.

I follow all your travels,
converse with you about the cities
where you could feel
forotten amid the lighted towers,
then big and warm at a performance
or a party in your honor.

Your tale is replayed to guitar chords
and whining harmonica strains,
realized in pure colors and words,
etched in the values
painted upon the canvas of life.

You move so comfortably
across these horizons
of the theater of memory.

Yet you, who sit recalling —
where *you* should go,
what *you* should do,
and what I can say to you,

I do not know.

Max Reif

(005june 2 07) Ode To A Poetry Anthology

Set me surfing now
over the waves of your pages
skimming the surface,
bump bump bump,
of the deep ocean
of my own experience

till I can plunge
off the board
into the rich, forgotten

depths of shining fish,
the ones with the great teeth,
the mythologized creatures

as real to you or I
but as yet undiscovered —

and below that somewhere,
the treasure,

the pearl

Max Reif

(007june2 07) Forehead Shitzky

How can a person feel arrogant?
Even the most powerful of us
can see everyone else's face
but his own.

It's like we're each holding
a lollipop we can't lick.

Life is a little
like Forehead Shitzky,
the card game
we played in junior high,

where everyone holds one card
face up on his forehead
without looking,
then bets.

Max Reif

(008june2 07) The Silence Of The Typewriters

It seems almost unfair
to write a poem about typewriters.
Maybe there should be a moratorium,
but before it starts:

I've noticed
a curious thing
about my typewriters
and my memory:

though I typed
papers and poems and stories
for at least three decades,
I can't picture
myself doing it,
not even once.

The little portable
dad kept in his office,
the family's noisy Smith-Corona,
and the enormous electric gizmo
I bought at an office sale,

They've all been relegated
to some interior warehouse
whose keys have gotten lost.

Max Reif

(02new!) Why We Get Out Of Bed

It's the promise of the sunrise, is it not,
that pulls us out of bed,
knowing a divine wave
has washed the world
clean overnight, and today

we may remember the combination
and the Door may finally
open to the true world,
the same world as yesterday
but re-united with its depths,

and life will finally fulfill its promise,
all beings walking about
with an unspeakable grace
upon holy ground,

laughing and loving
from one sacred activity to another,
the windows of buildings
looking out fully aware
and the traffic

dancing consciously
to the music of the spheres.

Max Reif

(03new!) Beyond The Hills

I gazed across the valley
at the mute, brown hills beyond,
dappled with dark, round, oaks,
that remind me of Africa's veld.

'What lies beyond you, hills? '
I asked, trying to peer
with imagination's eye
beyond and beyond and beyond,
into the heart of the world.

But the mist of my small, measured mind,
the haze of my limited life
grabbed onto the hills as I peered,
and I could not see beyond.

Max Reif

(05new!) Epiphany To-Go

It's a perfect evening after work,
the air so balmy my body seems
to dissolve in the breeze,

and I'm sitting at an outdoor
table at the Buckhorn Grill
on one of those new,
faux-European streets,
waiting for our take-home salads,

chomping ice and enjoying,
really enjoying, Billy Collins' poems —
laughing out loud at some, smiling big
as realization dawns
of what he's doing in others.

I suddenly realize a few diners
are looking at me,
then at the cover of the book,

pigeonholing me in public
as a lover of poetry,
probably a crazy poet myself,

and my joy reaches a pinnacle,
some sweet
paralysis of perfection.

Max Reif

(06new!) Another Poem On The Balcony

I sit in the walled
bunker of my mind,
perched on its revolving turret,
looking through its windows, and see

only the friendly, waving trees, and hear
only the breeze in their branches.
The sky is motionless
in its blue chemise.

There's nothing to defend against.
For once, the turret can rest,
the walls can come down.

Max Reif

(07new!) Faith

The buffet opens
and no one comes.
The waiters stand around
in their white shirts
crisp as the tablecloths.
The food is the day's offering,
regardless of its fate,

and a poet
sits at his table drinking tea,
scrawling in his notebook
another sacrament of words.

Max Reif

(09new!) Personal History

Did you ever
see a snail

get lost
in contemplation
of his trail?

Max Reif

(10new!) Portrait

Without a companion or laptop
or even a book or newspaper,
his skinny frame sits hunched up
in old jeans and a sweatshirt,
green ski cap on his head,
at a stiff right angle to the table,
as though there isn't space for him
in the room or in the world.

His small paper cup of coffee
in front of him on the table
exactly centered on his napkin,
he gazes out into the air.

Max Reif

.01) Taxi Memories

The taxi driver ferried passengers
in the clunky station wagon
anywhere they sent him,
bright sun or depth of night—

an old, woman needing safe passage
to the market and back home;
a prostitute enroute to work
on 'the stroll' downtown;
Pentacostal preachers arriving
at the airport for a conclave.
an old Vet who fainted in the lobby
and had to be carried
upstairs to his wife;
the young man visiting
the orphanage where he'd been raised,
going to get the money
and skipping out on his fare.

Sometimes the 'passenger'
was a box of chilled blood
on dry ice, urgently bound
for a hospital patient's veins.
You never knew where the next
fare would take you.

Sometimes he companioned
the white moon all night,
other nights had to go it alone
through frigid, moonless skies
as thick, white smoke
from factory chimneys
ascended the city like prayers.

The mystic radio's 3 AM crackling
could bring a voice from the night
that sent him gliding silent streets
to transport a lonely soul.

He knew the city
like he knew his own soul,
every passenger
a version of himself.

Sometimes he felt
an uncanny sense:
he was not just a tiny
point on the grid,
but the whole Mandala, at once.

Every afternoon at rush hour,
the bottom fell out of the world.
Workers raced madly
to empty downtown
as traffic cops blew whistles,
waving their frantic arms.

It took more than red lights and police
to counter entropy's force
there on the downtown streets.
The hand that directed the traffic
had to be Providence itself.

He watched the city and the world survive
miraculously, one more day—
and every day,
it happened again!

After a time he moved
on to other adventures,
but a green Checker taxi
will always be
cruising the streets of his heart,

just as there will always be
such ferrymen in the world—
as long as there are cities,
as long as there is night.

Max Reif

.02) The Stars

The stars that were over my head this morning
Were there from the First Day,
Those stars I hid crooknecked from in cities,
While travelling my wayward way.

Slowly at first, then faster,
I began to see, eyes blinded at first by neon and streetlamps,
And the stars' nights' closeness only speaking
In a few forays into the Midnights between cities,
Bedazzling my eyes to see the jewels
Darkness was strung with.
And always I wanted to stop, and enjoy, and stare, and pray,
But a motor inside me was going too fast,
And in vans or cars
I sped back to cities
To undo my mind's
Tightly wound springs.

Then in a dozen years
I came out under the stars,
And behold! The Canopy of Heaven
Was still there,
And I murmured and prayed in valleys
Like green cups for my love, and It said:
'You were too busy before,
But we have always been here,
And we always shall be.'
That which I was too busy to love
Patiently waited for me.

Now I have finished my business
And am free to love:
And the Morning Star's Song
Has come to me with a Joy
That had always been concealed
Within my breast,

And the Heavens have exploded
Into Singing

And the weeping
Of the morning dew.

Max Reif

.04) A Galaxy Past Gutenberg

In the glass case, a Gutenberg bible—
only three like it left in the world.
Surprising myself, I started to cry,
there in the Library of Congress,

as though we were seeing
a Platonic form
instead of a physical thing.
In a sense, the millions of books
in this and every library,
in all the Barnes & Nobles' and Borders'
and the ones on my bookshelves at home
all descended from this book.

In a glass case nearby
an almost identical bible,
handwritten by scribes,
took years to produce—
a labor of love, no doubt,

but Gutenberg granted
every poet the dream
that his own words in print
might encircle the world.

(Now I'll go home and type this
and click. It will un-write itself
into a flow of electrons
like the ones in my brain
that gave it birth,

a swarm of bees
speeding across the world
to rearrange themselves
a few seconds later
so these words
can form on your screen.)

.07) Questions, Looking Back

Why did we do all that? What were we looking for
When we stood conspicuously outside our cars on summer nights
In our madras shirts, white levis and loafers without socks
Along the parking diagonals in the median lane of Balson
In front of the high school that indentured us most of the year?

Why did we drive in my convertible chasing endless rumors of girls
Or midnight idylls in forbidden swimming pools that lapped in affluent backyards,
Air conditioners humming like the breath of their sleeping owners?

Why did I hate the Marquees who appeared to have real girls and newer cars
And to strut, not walk, in the eternal parade through our daytime high school
halls?

Why did the world wait to come alive until it had drowned in Night
And only our headlights could show us the way?

Why did I feel my blood beating, suddenly, an *inclusive* rhythm
The night that gang of paroled convicts who called themselves the '69ers'
Came out of hell with chains to beat people up, and a guy
From our football team whose name I can't remember now
Screamed "Lemme at 'em!" and dove into their open car window,

Or the night—this was before we were even old enough to drive—
When muscular, blonde Huns, no more than 18, but looking huge to us,
Came screaming out of nowhere as we talked and strolled
Through Heman Park at 3 AM, chasing us as we ran for our lives
A block beyond the other side of the park, all the way up
To Stanley's front porch, where we woke his dad,

Or in those forbidden, backyard swimming pools when a light went on in the
house and we had to flee,
And someone always did a last cannonball to roil the water?

What combination of deadened lives and genuine yearnings
Twisted around one another to open those gates of Night,
And where can I find such unlimited pastures today?

.08) Queens Vision, 1983

Somewhere in the bowels of Queens with my crazy 2nd wife,
going to meet her grandpa. The insane traffic
last night, some kind of Puerto Rican parade,
and her brother who'd just found God in the car with us,
shouting out the window, "Jesus is Lord, baby! "

Today sunny and quiet, the regular rhythm of the New York streets,
bagel and pizza shops, pedestrians, trees, subway entrances, and delis (the ones
with those paper coffee cups that show a Roman discus-thrower) .

Parking, we walk up the stairs in an ordinary brown, brick building.
An old thin man with glasses sits in an easy chair,
a devout Catholic, Cindy's told me. An hour we sit
and talk of practically nothing, the Yankees and St. Francis,
how he worked in the shipyards, went to church all his life.
A Presence slowly grows, beyond what's said.

Walking to the car I turn, look back.
A tree sheds red and golden leaves.
Traffic noises disappear in a silence
that swallows up their worldly sound.

The brown, brick building isn't ordinary now.
A kind of halo suffuses it,
body of the silence,
lending more beauty to the red and gold
than even autumn leaves should have.

On a busy New York street, time stops
in homage to the saintly man up there.
Is there an angel ladder here, that I can't see,
or just his prayers, kind thoughts and deeds
raining peace and beauty, as from a living shrine?

Max Reif

.10) Blue Jeans And Men's Eyes

Staring at that gold
seam up her ass,
stitched on that fathomless
blue that takes my eyes
as deep as a lover—

I find my way
in that blue night
by such luminous constellations
and that of the shining
rivets on her back pockets.

Five decades, my eyes
have strained
to de-magnetize themselves,
but every time, a Columbus
rises up within me and tries again
to peer around the geometry-defying
horizon of that curve,
to a new world,

or through it,
to some infinite depth.

The voice of reason
simply has no case,
once the actual body
of desire bursts into the room
and everyone else inside me
stampedes to see her,

that dark, voluptuous,
illuminated sky, and who knows,
perhaps the night sky itself
is really a great, jeaned woman?

Max Reif

.13) Berlin, November, 1989

to Herbert Nehrlich

In Berlin, where the Wall
was like an outcropping of the world's
skeleton that ran right along its surface,
the Soul of the world cracked that surface
those days in November, '89. As at shrines
on sacred meridians the world over—
Stonehenge, Anghor Wat, Macchu Piccu—
Spirit began pouring straight out of rock.

I can only imagine how pure the air was there.
At my art school on 57th Street in New York City
during a break, I saw the pictures in the TIMES,
of Angels dancing on the Wall, drunken in joy.
'FREIHEIT! ' I splattered on my canvas in red graffiti
in the huge painting of it all I began that day,
as the holy air of Liberty began spreading
like a massive front of weather moving East.

What was the order of the communist countries
whose hierarchies began to topple like toy soldiers?
Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the Baltics—
(like a litany of Hitler's armies marching backwards) .
Finally, a great rumbling filled the air
and the Soviet bear itself came crashing down,
a bear rug safely dead upon the floor.

I understood the world, those days,
sent transfusions of books in the mail
addressed simply 'Committee for National
Salvation, Bucharest, Romania'.
Here, now, writing about those times,
I just had to open my window to let more fresh air in.

It was like the '60s, when simple minds
suckled on the contraband milk of ideals,
massing in Paris, New York, Prague, Chicago, Frankfurt,

believed they were suddenly sweeping away the Old Order.
My history-conscious friend told me the same thing
had happened in 1848. But the Old Order
always seemed to weather the storm, somehow.

Today, 16 years after the Wall came down,
is the air still pure there where it once stood?
I don't know what's happened to the New World Order.
In the headlines, the Soul has long gone back into hiding;
fear and chaos seem back to their accustomed places.

We try to keep a New Order alive in ourselves
overthrowing dictators' armies that gather within,
knowing all the world's show comes out of a hat,
and any minute, any day, a white dove
will flap its wings and fly up from the hat again.

Max Reif

.14) A Meditation On Words

Domestic words
are yoked for work.
They will not
tell you secrets.

The wild breed
cannot be tamed.
They fly in forests
deep within.

But still the mind
and they appear.
They'll roost
right on the branches
of a page.

They sit awhile
and then fly off.
The type becomes
bare, winter trees.

But in the season
of quiet, they'll come again.

Max Reif

.15) November Crossing, Berkeley

I stand and wait for the light to change
at University and San Pablo,
one of those timeless corners.

Amid sycamores and streetlamps,
a hint of smoke in the darkening sky,
a city bus disgorges passengers,
momentarily obscuring my view
of the sari shop across the street.

Some of the people join me.
The crosswalk fills: in the crowd,
a *kente* pattern dress,
a thick, dark-blue turban,
workmen's flannel shirts,
an elderly lady on crutches:
the entire world seems to be here, waiting.

The breeze blows more hints:
the *halal* meat shop down the street,
autumn chestnuts in New York,
the playground at my boyhood school.

The light changes and we cross,
as the world is always crossing
the precarious intersections of its destiny.

Max Reif

.16) Moving In

When I first moved
to this neighborhood,
Life came abruptly
to my bed every morning
and pulled me into its river.

I *had* to wake up
to find my way—
the map of before
was no longer of use.

Homes, sky, vegetation,
people and cars
whirled around me,
a wild kaleidoscope.
I never walked past
the same place twice.

The neighborhood
began to solidify
after I'd lived here
a couple of months.

The kaleidoscope congealed.
I became a spider in a web,
having spun my mental grid
around the world.

I'd memorized my life!
I began to cross
the *same* intersection
every day, instead of
being surprised
by unexpected streams
of asphalt rising
suddenly before me.

Now I find
myself thinking,

'I need to get away.'

Max Reif

.17) Hymn To My Days As A Delivery Guy

I.

The company's magnetic logo plunked
onto both sides of my Mazda,
I sit parked beside a field of new snow
that covers my memory with innocence
in front of some faceless warehouse,
waiting for Jay the dispatcher to call.

Finally, he tells me where the packages wait.
I cross a bridge to the depressed
steel mill towns on the East Side
and the oil refineries I never saw as a child
though I grew up only twenty miles away.

Soon after that, the weather turns. The wild
spirit of the spring, a young lion,
jumps in my car window one night,
pawing me and carousing as I drive
thirty miles, across the Missouri,
for a lab pick-up at a rural hospital.

Always, I hang with my companions
NPR and endless books on tape,
styrofoam cups, delicacies and coffee,
a notebook and a pen.

II.

Every day the Mystery
of driving a sacred world,
God's footprints everywhere
as though He just left
and His fragrance still lingers.

Even as these moments come up in memory,
the humor of the game goes on,
for where I looked for Him in vain
when each moment had its fling with the Present,

now as each arises again,
part of a slide show frozen on mental film,
I see He was there all along.

Beauty is back there calling me
even while continuing to play hide-and-seek
in the life I've exchanged that one for,
different trappings on the surface
but underneath the same 'job',
pursuing the Loveliness that will not fade.

Max Reif

.22) When The Dentist Spoke At The Anti-War Rally

We had a dentist speak
at the anti-war rally
that we organized
in the summer of 1968,

we young men
home from college,
trying to legitimize ourselves
in the eyes of our parents
even as we turned activist.

We held a car wash
to raise funds.
When I wrote articles
about the war, I quoted
<i>businessmen</i>, as though
they were the only real gauge
of decent humanity.

I grew my hair a little,
and for a few months once
had a stubble beard,
until my cousin spat
venom at me
at the hospital
as we were waiting
for Grandpa to die,
shouting with hate-filled eyes,
'You look like a fairy! '

Mother said one day
that summer,
'I don't care what you do,
as long as you don't
look like what you are! '
and I'm still wondering
what she meant.

.23) The Doormen

Maroon-red blazers,
they make the doormen wear
in the lobby of this building
where I live,19 floors up.

I pass before the tribunal
of their faces
whenever I go out
or come back home,

make conversation
to overcome embarrassment
before these black men
hired to baby-sit
the 164 units-of-us
living in this tower.

'My doorman's waiting up' —
the thought flies through my head,
as if he's some dorm-mom,
as I come home at night.

Of course,
when I'm buzzed in,
it's a bored face
dutifully mouthing
'Good evening, sir'.
I struggle to get past him
without feeling guilt
for his low wages
or his boring job.

'How do you get
through the night? '
I ask one elderly,
black-bereted sentinel
on the midnight shift.
'I reads and I nods, '
he tells me.

I try to imagine
looking forward
to a maroon-red jacket
and buzzing open
a door for wealthy folks
until the day I die.

These men have become
arbiters of my conscience.
Every time I pass them
I try to justify my life,

silently contemplating
on the elevator: Am I
living my caring?

How else
could I deserve
this life of privilege,
19 floors above
the doormen?

(1998)

Max Reif

.24) Forever

Sweet summers we stayed outdoors
till we could no longer tell
the trees from the dark between them
and a brigade of fireflies had failed
in its quest to prolong the day.

We had a name for daylight's stopping
time in a slow embrace of farewell,
a kind reprieve to our outdoor games
till the moment night's blanket covered
the last of earth's cradle, and the blanket
came alive with singing: that name was *forever*.
We never spoke the name, but we knew—
Our minds were filled with forever.

Forever was also how long my friend and I
had known each other—we stood
by the trunk of the big tree in his front yard
trying to remember when we'd met,
struggling to give a name to a stretch
of the rolling river of Time, but such thoughts
flooded the beds of our minds.
All origins lay dim in memory's forest:
"two years ago", we murmured, but that
was just another name for forever.

Ah, that child's "forever" turned out to be
a comet speeding through the vaster
firmament of our allotted days.

Max Reif

.25) Fires In Texas And Oklahoma

What God has ordained
can't be avoided
We can't see the marks
on people and places,
but Nature can.

Nature is God's servant.
Tame waves rise up,
whole prairies burn,
mountains skip like rams.

Machines serve God, too.
A hundred people
who have never met
get in a plane,
congregating to fly
into the next world.

I went to Samarra
to flee from Death,
but Death was seeking me
there, not here.

A Master told the people,
"I will die within a week."
Six days later, he was fine.
"Fake! " shouted the people,
and rose up and killed him.

Mysteries can't be unraveled,
Time's ticker tape
reveals only their surface.

Each of us lives
on a fault line.
Some day we'll
disappear from here
and appear somewhere else.

.26) My Poems Have Their Moods

Sometimes my poems are shy,
tired of the scrutiny of eyes,
tired of being undressed.

They come and snuggle
under me like baby chicks.

Rested, they venture forth again.
Now they become eyes,
Buttonholing people on corners:
'Pssst—help you see? '

Each has a mission.
Some reveal the hilarity
in the composition of matter.
Some spread the word
that the sky is falling.
Others announce a shout
of joy everywhere at 10 AM.
One tells of a revolution
already begun in the bones.

What do I really know about my poems?
They come out of a place that,
a moment before,
I never knew was there.

Yes, I try to shelter them,
knowing all the while
they're not mine.
That's just the mystery
of birth and parenthood.
I can't stop this thing I prayed for now.
I think of shutting down
this operation for a real rest,
but it's invisible,
I can't even find it!

.27) Dispatch From The Field Office

No 'field office' like Burger King in the off-hours.
They even turn off the muzak to save money.

But I glance around at the other clientele:
The punchy guy in the rainbow suspenders is here.
I saw him here last time,
then again when I stopped at Target on my way home;
and there's the homeless woman with her trusty backpack
who does her daily ablutions in the ladies' bathroom.

I wonder, are these my mirror, my soul twins?
Have I eclipsed myself into a fast-food delusion,
joining this culture of nomads seeking a Bargain
and wandering from soda fountain to soda fountain?

Still, I'm happy as a child, with my free refills
a notebook, pen, book, some drawing paper
and a window out which I keep tabs
on the world going by. I feel like a king,
here in my ringside seat on Creation.

Max Reif

.27) My Poems Hang Out On The Corner

My poems hang out on the corner.
They go for rides with strangers.
Like any parent I worry.

When they come home for the night,
some tell me where they've been.
Others don't say a word.

There's nothing I can do.
If I gave them enough love and care
they'll be ok out there.

Max Reif

.28) Father's Blessing

1.

Every piece of clothing
felt soaked with dread as I packed.
My brother had called from St. Louis,
saying this might be the time:
"And you, my father,
there on that sad height..."

I prepared to enter
the solemn tunnel
of passage, father to son

since the time
aged Isaac placed his hand
on Jacob's head,
thinking he was Esau.

Was some trickster
at work here, too?

2.

When I was 8,
the rope I was following
my father along
to manhood
gradually started
slipping away,
till I had no guide at all.

Later came my rebellion
and the rage
of the displeased patriarch
that his young Isaac
refused to place his head
upon a block of sacrifice
into the prison of a suit and tie

but tried to go his own way
along a bridge of passage
that was missing slats.

When the son fell
into a black abyss,
the patriarch cried
his vat of tears
till none were left.

The son found other fathers
who had the nets to scoop him up,
and as the years stretched out,
the baffled patriarch asked,
"Why these *other*
father figures in your life? "

He scratched his greying head
at a son who had given up
life as *he'd* known it
to follow a God
no more solid
to the father than the air,
no more substantial to him
than fairies or wind.

No way to sing again,
"Sonny boy,
climb upon my knee..."

Breakfasts of reconciliation
would end with peremptory
hugs after gruff words,
resentments too alive
to stay politely buried.

3.

Entering the room,
I saw a sleeping man.
Too late? He must

have heard me walk in.
He blinked, then stared.
<i> "Maxie's here!
Now I can die! "</i>

You always were a joker, dad,
but that may not have been a joke.

I fumbled through my mind for words.
The family came, and then went out,
And we were left alone again.

"Anything you want to say? "
I risked, not knowing
if the patriarch would bless
or snub his eldest son.

A little while earlier,
he'd said, "I've got to go to work! "
and tried to pull his tubes out.
Now he looked at me
with total clarity.

"I'm proud of you, " he said.
"I'm happy that you're teaching.
If you can sell your writing,
you'll have everything you want."

I bowed my head,
received my father's blessing—
and felt my burden lift.

Max Reif

.29) The Wall

Even Berlin was not divided
like the city of Myself.
I long to visit you, my Soul,
on the other side of the Wall.

I know only this side of the Wall,
with its trees and roads and buildings
and its certain alternation of sun and shadow.

Closing my eyes, I sit on my pillow,
feeling emanations of a Sun beyond our sun,
rippling sperms of a joy that would be pink
were the lights on in there,
dancing, tickling me, laughing toward me.

You are said to be closer than my breath, O God.
Why then can I not scale or dismantle this Wall,
in order to get somewhere so near?

They say the other side of the Wall
shines like millions of suns and moons
and can't really even be described—
and all of that, I Am.

They tell of a man who ran across a field
to climb the Wall
and tell those below what he saw,
but when he got to the top
he started laughing and dove over
and was never seen again.

I hang out beside the Wall,
feeling the rays that come through,
longing for this world and That World to be united.
Can I build a podium and stand behind it, shouting,
'Mr. God, tear down this Wall! '?

Here, I long for There—
for There to be Here, too—

for I can no longer tolerate
the fickleness of joy,
the inconstancy of peace.

Max Reif

.30) The Sense Of Touch

I hold the steering wheel
of the car in my hands,
I hold the world,

gripping tightly
its vinyl over hard plastic,
able to turn on a point
with my power steering,

peering over the dashboard
out through the windshield
at a world I seem to control,

driving at a whim on excellent freeways
to any point on or beyond the horizon.

O complacent illusion of control,
until I remembered last night's dream—
My father appeared,
my father who died five years ago.

'I'm here! ' he said. 'Touch me! '
I reached out and touched.
You *are* here! ' I gasped,

comforted, and woke up,
and he was gone,
and remains gone

Max Reif

.32) Short Order Diner

Behind the counter, everything seems like a movie
as the gracious, smiling cashier takes my order.
The cooks are busy. I see only their backs.
Scraping and frying sounds rise from the grill,
mingling with the gurgle of voices and pop music.
Under a painted menu sign a whole wall long,
packages of hamburger buns and piles of plates
sit on shelves, waiting to be used.
All the ritualized activity back there
is only to serve me, out here in my booth.
Leisurely sipping my coffee, I feel secure.

Max Reif

.33) Photo: Miss Lindahl's 5th Grade Class, Flynn Park School, 1959

Where are you, boys and girls
of Miss Lindahl's 5th grade class?

What became of you
when you slipped off
the far edge of my world?

Many of you
I never saw again,
or even thought of
until I saw this picture,

yet you occupy a place
that can't be filled
by anyone but you —

so much yourselves,
untrained as yet
in putting on a face.

Your faces are colors
long forgotten,
your names sound notes
of a long-lost scale:

Harvey Baer, Gail Rutherford,
Marion Phipps, Jonathon Katz,
Temmy Goldwasser, Randy Wahl —

your names are bells that angels ring,
tolling the music of the spheres.

Max Reif

.34) Tone Poem: The Finale, 'Leonard Cohen — I'M Your Man'

He stands at the mic,
craggy faded eagle
in a grey suit, singing the verse
in a voice of smoke

surrounded by stark figures
black like spectres
from his own youth.

As he finishes,
the band picks up the chorus
and he stands there

smiling with his eyes
closed, just listening
and you feel his whole

life in that smile
and your life, too,

as though the silent
voice of the most beautiful
losers has given
birth to the whole world.

Max Reif

.35) After Viewing 100 Photos Of Mideast War

These timeless scenes of war,
of the people leaving their homes,
the columns of soldiers and tanks
and the rubble left by the shells —

it scarcely even matters
what color the uniforms are,
you could substitute yellowed photos
a hundred years old or more,
and no one would know the difference.

Human anger, reaching its limit,
spills over in scenes like this,
warriors and innocent victims
and somewhere, hidden in buildings,
the ones who conceived the slaughter.

The pictures we see remind us,
all those in our human lineage,
how fragile are our encampments,
how tender the threads of home,
a neighborhood where we can walk
and a room to sit down for a meal.

All we who are living witness
say a prayer for the suffering victims
and a thanks for a safe, warm bed,

and cry for this human condition
of transience upon the earth.
There, but for Grace, do we go.

Max Reif

.35) Time: A Meditation

The bird of Time sat on a branch.
I thought to clip her wings, and so
I climbed upon her back — alas,
the bird took flight again, and now
I'm at the far end of my life.

She lighted there of her free will.
How foolish I was then, to think
that I could stop, or slow, her flight,

and yet, that time, when Time sat still —
how sweet it was — how sweet.

Max Reif

.36) For Small Sins...

I ask forgiveness
for my complicity
in the world's impending
styrofoam catastrophe,

for getting a new cup sometimes
when I have one at home
or in our other car;

and for writing poems on the backs
of flyers that someone paid
his good money for so he
could advertise things;

for the way I'll waste still more money
on diet coke from the convenience store
on the way home, when we have
plenty of coke in our own refrigerator,

and for leaving the water
running while I do the dishes.

I know I use more Equal
than is good for my
divinely-given body,
and go around with a little
buzz from caffeine when I could
have unadulterated peace;

and because I try to keep
my consciousness balanced
by chasing coffee
with huge glasses of water,
I pee twenty times a day,
flushing the toilet each time
in a drought state.

Have mercy on me, an abject
consumer.

Max Reif

.38) Habits

Don't be fooled, a habit
is a horse that's been tamed.
When you're heading
through dense woods,
forget the reins a moment,
taking its docility for granted—
and there it goes, heading
for the old, wild places!

Max Reif

.39) The Greatest Poem

The greatest poem
is the one you're writing,

sparks flying from your pen
as from Vulcan's furnace,

hand and arm lubricated
and calibrated with a mind

that's up on a ladder
at its far end,
hopefully receiving notes
from an angel or two—

fresh bread,
Rumi called it,

a little piece of Soul,
'out there' and sculpted
to perfection...

or *near* perfection,
you see the next day
as you fix a flaw
that's appeared overnight,

and a few more
the day after that. Then

the Life-force flows
into a new creation,
this one has hardened
and is left to feed the birds,

and some day when you've
forgotten about it completely,
you'll come upon it again, feel awed,
and wonder, 'Who *wrote* that? '

.40) The Lottery Wizard

The guy in front of me at 7-Eleven
takes forever to make up his mind,
savoring the power in his finger
as he points it like a dowser
at the colored cards
he hopes are lucky today:
Scratchers, Fantasy 5, Daily Derby—
and don't forget the Power Ball.
He nonchalantly pulls a thick
wad of bills from his pocket,
takes off the clip,
and like a card shark
finesses several
off the top onto the counter,
peons doing his bidding,
as he tries to make
the moment last.

Max Reif

.41) Spiritual Analogy: The Bee

The bee goes for the nectar,
diving to the center of the flower,
madly drinking all he can devour,

then scrambles out and
unbeknownst to him,
fertilizes every
flower in the field.

Max Reif

.42) 2nd Wife, A Fragment

I met my 2nd wife
at a Howard Johnsons
outside Daytona Beach.

Gave up trying
to hitch a ride north on I-95
in the caravan of moving jewels

and cut across the clover leaf
toward the neon sign for dinner
and to see if mom
could wire some money for a bus.

A thin, young blonde
was sitting at the counter,
talking to herself.

Maybe she just needs
someone to talk to, I thought,
and an hour or two later
I'd paid for her dinner,
found out a little about her,
how she'd taken a plane
south from Jersey'
just the day before
after asking God for a better life
(maybe I was that better life) .

We took a cab downtown
and found a motel,
Daytona Beach in the off-season,
all ferris wheels and snack shops.

Next morning, waking up,
she said she could hear
the sound of the ocean
for the first time, meaning
something besides
her own, loud thoughts.

A day later we caught
the greyhound north to Myrtle Beach.
She joined me in my motel room home.
That was January — wasn't till June
that we got married,
and soon after that
headed west in the car again

to Boulder, for the 'On The Road'
conference at the U. of Colorado,
celebrating 25 years since
Kerouac's book had come out.

She could be fun,
had an adventurous spirit,
though once in awhile
when we walked
near the tall hotels downtown,
she'd get all paranoid,
start talking crazy about the Mafia.

In the Spring
we got evicted
from the nice place
we'd moved to by the ocean,
partly so the landlady
could triple the rent
for the tourist season,

partly because every so often
our arguments raised a ruckus.

We found a 6-room
farm house for \$110 a month
across the state line in North Carolina
and inland a few miles,
near Tabor City,
'Yam Capital of the World'.

The house was on an acre
of land along a tobacco road

sprinkled with pine forest,
and I learned how lovely the pink
tobacco flowers are in the spring.

Outside my study window
lay a green meadow, where
that same spring, white birds
would land, and I'd almost faint
from the beauty of it all.

One evening the car broke down in Myrtle Beach
and we force-marched something like 14 miles
along the winding, wooded back road,
I don't know how we did it.

Another time we were broke
and I went looking for old
coke bottles in the ditch
along the roadsides,
and found enough to tide us over —
fond and selective memories.

After the conference in Boulder,
we drove down to Denver
to visit my friend Ed,
then up to Cheyenne, Wyoming
with its gold-domed statehouse
for a week in a cheap hotel,
where I wrote my first book of poetry.

After an argument, though,
she took the car east
and left me stranded,
and I didn't know a soul.

I felt free, freed,
thumbed back down to Denver
in back of a pick-up truck.
It was 1982, and daydreaming
in the back of the truck
as the fields and meadows
went by in the sun,

I found a thought
snaking through my head:
'This ride is the end of the '60s.'

In Denver, more adventures,
staying with Ed
while I did a minstrel gig
on the new downtown mall.

A couple months later,
my estranged wife wrote
she was coming into town
on such-and-such a bus.
Ed and I went to the station,
saw her from a distance.
I think she was talking to herself again.

She looked a little crazy,
and we left the station
without even saying hi.

Max Reif

A Few Rooms

The room where a young boy
beheld toy soldiers' bedspread battles,
great legions clashing in still air —

Where later Mother surprised him as he dressed,
her yellow eyes as sharp as hawks'.

A few years later,
a room with a love-seat,
a shy, first kiss.

Passion's frenzied grasping
on a bed that filled a tiny room
a few years after that

then, an upstate New York
farmhouse bedroom —
pounding on the floor to try
to make the LSD turn off.

After a lost year, a room
into which God flooded,
a pinkish Ocean,
washing all my memories clean.

Max Reif

A Gorilla In My Back Yard

There's a gorilla in my back yard.
I'm making friends with him,
approaching cautiously,
as he moves toward my world.

He says a few words,
or what he thinks are words,
to show me how 'human' he is.
He clumsily hikes
a football through his legs.

I've taken a risk
to approach this great beast
whose silver-steel muscles
could crush me in an instant.

Venturing out of his habitat,
he's overcome his natural
fear of the unknown.

A great sharing's
taking place
behind my house.

Max Reif

A Morning In North Beach, San Francisco

Made it to Cafe Trieste, nice walk
through a downtown where everyone seemed to be
'preparing a face for work', till I got here to North Beach-

only place in the world where Italy borders China.
Had to run over to China to buy a pen,
the storekeepers in Italy weren't up yet.

So I've been here an hour and a half,
pleasant atmosphere, not too crowded, really a nice,
Italian, or Italian/beatnik, feeling. Civility.

A guy came up to me, first asked if I need
any problems solved, I said I couldn't think of any,
then he asked if I might support the arts,
and showed me several booklets of his poems.

Rather than reply with, 'BUT I'M GOING TO WRITE
A POEM MYSELF IN A MOMENT! ',
I just asked his prices, and bought the \$5 book
rather than a \$10 one. Turned out to be
'duets', poems he wrote quickly with friends or passersby,
not satisfying to read, so far.

I asked him if he'd autograph the book.
He brought it back to me a little later with his name
and 'Solve any problem, \$20 an hour! ' 'Genius idea, \$1,000.'

'Hey, wait, I wanted an autograph, not an ad! '

But he seemed so crestfallen, about to fall over like a stout
tower of Pisa. I patted him on the back.
'It's ok, don't worry, you did autograph it, it's fine.'

That's what I like about this place.

Max Reif

A Personal History And Mythology Of Blue Jeans

In the old movies,
The women wore
Skirts and dresses.

Marilyn Monroe,
In "River of No Return",
Had on tight blue jeans.

Mom wore dresses.
(Did women have legs,
Or were they
Like mermaids under there?
And why did they leave
a toilet full of blood, sometimes?)
In the mid '50s
She got some tight pants,
With green, vertical lines
And some kind of flower pattern.

She had legs, and an ass.
(toosie, she'd taught us to call it,
A word that sounds like a cushion.)
I felt embarrassed when she wore them.

Then she got a denim skirt.
"It looks like blue jeans! "
Said my brother Fred.
It did, with stitched, white
Pockets on the rear.

I felt I'd die, that eyes,
My own included,
Would rivet on Mother's ass.

Blue jeans were for boys.
(Our mythologies, they say,
Determine how we dress—
In this case, how our parents
Dressed us, after the War,

In cities and in suburbs,
Little cowboys everywhere,
Kicking soccer balls
And sliding slides,
Who'd never plowed a field
Or herded cows.
I fantasized of boys, back then,
For blue jeans x-rayed bodies
With their pockets
And their rivets
And their stitches.
"This is beyond
Naked, " I'd say to myself,
Wondering "Why isn't it
Against the law? "
Of course, I never asked aloud.)

And then, in junior high,
One shapely girl
started wearing
Tight blue jeans.
She found the secret first.
(Maybe she'd seen
"River of No Return".)

Today, half the women
Who walk into the coffee shop
Are clad in that blue intrigue.

After 40 years of contemplation,
My mind still cannot penetrate
The intrigue and the mystery

Or dethrone the mythology
Of those streamlined bodies

That help to bring my world alive,
though clothed
In its illusions.

Max Reif

A Poet's Delusion?

If I can write
a poem or two in a day,
say something that seems
worth saying, then I feel
I'm earning the space
I take up on the earth,

though in point of fact,
for all I know, my life
is going to hell

Max Reif

A Question In Rhyme

An obese young woman, dressed
as the thin girl she wants to be

leaves me wondering
about the fit
of my own
identity.

Max Reif

A Room Full Of People Talking

A room full of people talking like runaway
trains that won't ever stop.
No sun or moon rises or sets for the room—
no day or night, no seasons.
No one eats or drinks.

They talk in twos or small groups
on the sofas, on chairs, on the floor.
Voices rise and mingle.
Words dance in the air like cigarette smoke
with words from adjoining conversations.
The room has become a container of pure sound,
the residue of exchanged thoughts deposited into brains.

An introvert comes into the room.
The door behind him closes and locks.
The talkers are locked into one another's eyes—
a room full of people talking and nowhere to go.

He stands against the corner of a wall.
He tries to *become* the corner,
feels naked and starts to sweat.
He tries to look like part of one of the groups.
It's obvious he isn't.

He could sit down somewhere and listen,
that's how you start, maybe,
but the people have been talking for an hour.
They're like bullet trains moving fast, each group is a train.

He stands there and contemplates the alchemy
of conversation, connection and energy.

Max Reif

A Tale Of Two Bubbles

Two bubbles,
floating in
the cosmic sky —
the world and I.

Blown by a single
bubble-maker,
from the same solution.

Though that great bubble
took its shape
so long before my own,

we float along
a common arc,
and will until
the day mine pops —
and then, some day,
the world's will, too.

And such spaciousness
we'll leave,
before the backdrop
of a million stars!

(.....july 27)

Max Reif

A Writer's Journal

Went to Kinko's last night
to copy my manuscripts. Ha!
Everybody else thought their work
was as important as mine—
even that guy with his
family reunion album.
He'll find out soon enough!

Ruined another \$80,000
xerox machine trying to scratch
the white-out from my pages off the glass.
Patience, Max. let it dry first:
that makes 3 machines this year,

but these will be trivial expenses
when I sell the movie rights.

Got nabbed taking extra packets
of Equal at Barnes & Noble,
stuffing them in my pockets
after sweetening my coffee.

Now I'm banned from all 819
Barnes & Noble stores.
They'll be sorry. I'm going
to ask for a written apology
before I let them carry my book.

Meanwhile, have to appear
for Petty Theft, the 18th.
I can still go to Borders,
so no big deal.

Max Reif

About Time

Time, that relentless snail,
outpaces every cheetah,

crawls on toward the infinitely
receding finish line

and has no rival but he
who truly lives
in the Present,

for whom the very
idea of a race
has disappeared.

Thus, waiting for Spring Break,
I'm amazed at the infinitesimally slow
pace of the progression of moments,
and how they ever added
up to 58 years I'll never know,

and also wondering,
if I were really "Here, Now",
would there be such
thing as waiting, at all?

Max Reif

After A Phone Call With My Wife

Nice to have a friend
somewhere in the world,

someone to hold my kite string,
whose string I can hold, as well.

When we were getting
to know each other,
I started to think, 'I love you' —
sometimes, in truth, 'I need you.'

Then, as we got more committed,
those other parts of us
started to show up,
like a suitcase full of devils
we'd each unpacked
once we'd settled in,

and I often thought,
'Leave me alone! '

Things run their course like that,
touching both opposites.

Sometimes I think of all
the former lovers in the world
who can't stand one another now.

Does their pride ever let them think
of how they breathed 'baby, baby! '
to this person now so detested,

and that there's something
crazy about that?

You and I have rubbed
against each other plenty,
but we've stayed with the process,

like the ancient Hindus
churning the Milky Way into butter,
who had to witness the demons
that came up on the way,

And today, quite spontaneously
after hanging up the phone, I thought,
how nice to have a friend in the world.

Max Reif

All These Famous Poets I've Never Heard Of

Someone once consoled me
in a rejection letter from a magazine,
'we're publishing _____ instead.'

I was supposed to realize I shouldn't be hurt
because _____ was so famous.
Only I'd never heard of her.

Learned friends are *always* reeling off
names of famous poets I've never heard of:
that's how I know I'm a *dilettante*.

I leave the name blank above,
because now I know
the person really *is* famous,
and I don't want to embarrass myself.

Twenty years later, I still
haven't read her poetry, though.

Max Reif

Almost A Sonnet

My drug of choice is food, while my wife
prefers the smoky kiss of cigarettes.

We have a truce now, whereby I don't nag her:
she more or less leaves me alone, as well.
That seems the best—respect the person
to make choices. I can't see, of course,
beyond today's horizon. Consequences
await us, statistically, around the bend,
although there always seem to be a few
who slip somehow past statistics' tentacles.

My mental calculus of today's enjoyment
depends on my forgetfulness of tomorrow—
we're ostriches. Yes, we all will die,
but when, and how? I'm writing this to shout
what I've been whispering, inside, so long, about.

Max Reif

An Irish Invocation

And may your thoughts
inhabit your mind
as peacefully
as the cows graze
on that distant, golden hill

Max Reif

Analogy: President Bush And Iraq

The problem is pike:
someone dropped
a pair in the lake,
and these savage predators
are multiplying,
eating all the other fish,
whose natural habitat this is.

Your mind is a vast, vast net.
You throw it and its resources
into the lake
to try to surround all the pike.

If you leave even two
they'll infest the whole place again.
Then you'll cast your net once more,

maybe a bigger net,
to try to get it around
the whole problem
once and for all.

It's hard to tell, each time—
you can boast of success at first.

Sooner or later, though,
it will be obvious to all:
the pike will be gone,
or only pike will remain.

Max Reif

Around Lafayette Reservoir (New Edits)

1.

Ah, California,
with your paved-path
wilderness a mile
down the road
from *Peets*,

this morning I got on
the merry-go-round,
joined the parade:

joggers, walkers,
skaters, bikers,
people with dogs and babies,
talkers on the phone,
perfume of sunscreen,
masses of walkers
with walkmen —

even two people
with faces deep
in books, whose feet
somehow kept finding
the next step.

2.

Something's changed
since I last came here
fifteen years ago,
when I tried to greet
each person who went by,

crossing at times
some microscopic
line into flirtation
and judging savagely
the ones who would not respond

with a wave or a word
or a friendly look.

Now a married man
and more secure
in my domestic world,
my soul is content to swim
within the reservoir
of my own solitude.
And if my glance
is not returned,
all right.

Halfway around
The lake I greet
A couple I know
walking their dog.
The husband can't shake hands,
he holds the leash in one of his,
a cup of Starbucks in the other.

3.

When someone passes me—
in this case not a jogger, even,
just a guy with longer strides—
there's still the same
chagrin and shame
I always felt, in spite
of knowing what
I *should* have felt.
Vestigial instinct leaves me with
the sense I've lost a race.

But now I notice that a man
who's been in front of me
the whole way, who jogs awhile,
then walks, then jogs, has stopped
and left the path to pee.

I pass him with a surge of childish glee,
like a miler `cross a finish line.

How strange it is, the human mind.

4.

Finished with my
two point seven
miles, I sit
upon a bench and write,
watching the strollers
come and go,
figures for a modern
"Sunday in the Park with George."

The geese honk, water ripples,
and the breeze blows gently
on my cheek.

Down on the concrete bank
four unkempt, red-beaked vultures
strut almost too ironically,
as if to say, "This too shall pass! "

Reminded of passing time, I glance
over at the parking meter by my car #151
whose blotch of red tells me that indeed it has!

Max Reif

Art

Orpheus played his lute
under the avocado tree,

sang for ages beneath
that glorious canopy
before departing.

Ages later,
a young wanderer
happened to fall asleep
under the tree one night

and woke up the next morning,
his head full of songs.

Max Reif

At 6: 30 Am, Starbucks

I frequent a well-lighted cafe'.
Outside, wraiths wander in the darkness,
a realm of hungry ghosts.
This morning even Death was there,
wrapped in a beggar's blanket,
turning to look at me.

This world is not separate from that one.
I came in from the dark,
but as I sit, and read and write,
the shadows seem to lighten,

and when I leave,
it shall be into Sunrise.

Max Reif

At Peets

I like the buzz of the coffeehouse,
soothing to the ears,
and the quiet, classical music,
and the coffee-grinder's gears.

I like the marble conter-tops
like Italy come west,
and the native art from the coffee lands,
bringing my mind to rest

so I can get down to business:
lubricant thoughts that come,
and the lubricated flow from my pen,
amid this pleasant hum.

Max Reif

At The Fast Food Restaurant

A family like an atomic structure
walks across the parking lot,
small boy an electron
running in circles, chasing a bird.

A boy and girl a little older,
part of a stable structure,
walk in the rhythm
set down by mom and dad.

Max Reif

August 17,2005

Today they're pulling the settlers out of Gaza,
people whose strong beliefs in their Destiny
won't stop the bulldozers now at their front doors,

and a 23 year-old copy editor at the CHRONICLE
has cancer that's spread to her brain a little.
She writes about her struggle on the front page.

11,000 people have applied for 400 jobs
at a new Wal-Mart in Oakland;

Down in Texas the lady
who lost her son in the war
is still trying to meet with the President.
He met with her last June, but called her 'mom'
all the way through the interview,
I wouldn't like that either.

The pain of the day's news
is almost too much to bear
as I sip my coffee, try to find room
for the world in my heart,

and wonder how long my own life
will keep flowing along like a peaceful river.

Max Reif

Autobiographical Fairy Tale

He wears a suit,
she wears a dress.
He goes to work.
You know the rest:

She cooks and cleans.
The children play.
This is the family,
by day.

The food smells good.
At night sometimes,
a cradle rocks,
a bright moon shines:

But some nights—
when, you never know—
Mom and Dad
just up and go.

Two giant Ogres
take their place,
anger etched
on each one's face.

Medusa and
the Clown King come
(she's the real boss,
he's too dumb) .

Live snakes writhe
in Medusa's hair,
Her face is grey;
no blood flows there.

The Clown King
wears a golden crown,
but when he jokes

you feel put down.

If you *could* laugh,
then you might see
he has no real
authority.

With parents gone,
the children fight—
they ask for guidance
through the night.

This king cannot
allay their fears—
tells one more joke
and disappears.

Mom and dad return,
put on dinner and TV.
Family life resumes,
the children lose all memory.

Max Reif

Autumn

The slow burning of the leaves
prefigures the ripening of my soul.

Today the weather
is like a companion,
the warm, still air
poised at a precipice
before its leap into winter.

Time has taken a breath.
Something inside me
is waiting to fall, like the leaves.

Max Reif

Benicia

Now I can hear the sound of lapping waves
beside this muddy inlet of the bay,
this beach of sorts — this narrow, dark-brown strip.

A faint sea-smell comes flying on the breeze,
and this is all it takes to light in me
the vision — look, smell, feeling, taste, and sound —
of the great Sea that swells unseen beyond
the narrow mouth spanned by a silver bridge,
from this spot just a hundred yards away —
that Sea from which these little tides have come —
and lose myself in Its vast, pure expanse.

Max Reif

Beware The Ring Of Power

Should we feel surprise
when the public-spirited
words of our leaders belie
their smudged fingerprints,
seemingly left

in some shadowy game
as though there are two governments,
one affirming ideals,
the other cutting deals?

It all seem to show one thing —
someone's put on the *ring of power*
and it has a life of its own.

Remember the Nixon tapes?
Did you feel a kind of thrill
to learn the President
had feet of clay —
peppering his talk
with 'Jew this' and 'Jew that'
and a whole soup of obscenities?

Now Karl Rove
seems to be running
a cabal to try to turn
our government's machine
to partisan ends.

The same pattern
appeared, at least,
through the filters
of many *Republican* eyes,
with only the names different,
during the Clinton years.

Something in us longs
to see our so-called leaders
as fallible as those of us

whose innocent personae
hide every kind of secret.

But behind the stage
of the public drama
eternal values wait like gods,
not so much
desiring to ensnare us,
but simply Present
in the grid of existence.

Aristotle told us long ago
the message of the downfall
of a Hamlet, or a Nixon, or,
should it be, a Bush —

look to yourself!

Max Reif

Beyond All This

I see a child press a button,
then shout and jump with delight
that he made something happen,

but I have been pressing
the same buttons all my life
and I long for a way

out of every morning's maze
of roads and traffic
and people behind counters,
and all the rest of the repetitive
rounds of what I face and do,
or the Secret

of how to be in the maze
without being its slave,

and how to stay aware
of the difference
between comfort
and freedom

(.....10sept2)

Max Reif

Beyond The Cliched Sky

Closing the car door behind me,
I walked through an intense sunset
toward Radio Shack, a block away.

The sky's on fire!, I thought,
believing I might have found
the first line of a poem.

A moment later I realized
that a million people think
those exact words every night.

What can I think, I wondered,
that a million people
don't think every night?

'The sky burned to ash! '

'But it didn't!' a part of me shouted.
That part of me is now bound
and gagged in the back of my car.
Here's the poem that was born:

***The sky burned to ash,
leaving a jewel of lapis lazuli
that I wear today
in the setting
of my ring.***

Max Reif

Bibliophilia

The Sunday paper came just now.
I dove right past the thick, black headlines

in a frenzied quest for the Book Section,
shrinking year by year and hidden
so far inside the folded mass, it can take
a couple passes to find it.

I prefer to encounter my world
as it appears when packaged
between covers.

Instead of bloody battlefields,
maybe some anecdotal
survey of the history of war, or armaments,
or even fashions in uniforms —

or something tracing
the rise and fall of empires,
bestowing a sense of pattern,
of the broad sweep of time
without the threat that time itself
will be swept out
from under all our feet.

Instead of tracts describing
the ongoing clashes between nations,
the scandals within institutions,
I like to read of short stories
about the everyday
people who make up
those nations and institutions.

Somehow, the discomfiting
disasters of the thick, black headlines,
trailing their dark clouds of smoke,

have been refined away,
siphoned off — *civilized*, when seen

through this lens. In my leisure,
I survey the hidden
life behind 'events', and find

it goes quite well
with a good cup of coffee.

(.....july23)

Max Reif

Bobby

That summer my second wife and I
lived on the state road in rural
North Carolina in the 6-room farmhouse
I got for \$100 a month, amid
the tobacco fields, which by the way
have lovely, pink flowers in the spring,

and oh, yes, that spring, too,
the beauty of the white
birds on the juice-green
meadow outside my study
all but made me faint.

Summer was different. Heat rose
from the road's black asphalt
in visible, radiating waves.

Every day around noon,
looking down that road
that parted fields and woods
as far as you could see, we'd spy
a tiny figure, who would slowly grow,
trudging past our house
half an hour later, then slowly
shrink till he disappeared
in the opposite direction.

One day I decided to ask him
where he was walking every day.
'My name is Bobby, ' he replied.
'My daddy's sick. I walk
ten miles there and ten back
every day to give him his medicine.'

After that, we'd wave when Bobby passed.
A couple weeks later one day
breathing very hard when he got
to our place, he collapsed.
Thinking he might die, I drove him

to the Tabor City hospital,
half-carrying him in

to the Emergency Room, then to the room
they admitted him to, remaining there,
holding this man I hardly knew.
'Jesus loves you and I love you! '
I told him over and over again.

Bobby didn't die, it wasn't
his heart after all, they said.
Some kind of indigestion.

Calling back those days
is like remembering
heroes at the dawn of time.
The world was different then.
Or I was young.

Max Reif

Brooks And Warren's Understanding Poetry*

These pages are a river
down which a young girl watches
her lover disappear,

and someone meditates upon
crude rhythms of a city street
and finds a suffering God.

The seasons change
and change again,
a pear tree reaches high,
a cock crows, and the chickens sit
beside a red wheelbarrow.

All the seasons of the soul
are ripened and transmuted here,
and I, the reader, disappear,
as well, into the flow.

*UNDERSTANDING POETRY, by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, has been a premier poetry textbook in high schools and colleges, in revised editions, for 6 decades. The book is basically a luxuriously rich anthology, with commentary on poems organized into chapters to illustrate the various facets of poetics.

Max Reif

Cafe' Of Dreams

Cafe' of dreams,
are you my meditation hall,
where instead of in rows
on pillows, watching thoughts,
we sit at little tables,
committing thoughts to paper,
thoughts and feelings, too,
returning stronger to the world,
carrying a gift,

or are you more
like an opium den in which,
imbibing potions,
each one dreams
a vapid dream,
creating worlds that don't exist
and battling shadows
that never walked the earth?

Max Reif

Cafes

Sometimes I think real life
only takes place in cafes,
those reflective islands
in the middle of the stream
where living, we watch life go by.

Could we have all our meals in cafes?
Do some job there between meals—
stringing beads, stuffing envelopes,
writing novels? Then, when it's dark,
the way the clerk in my Indian hotel
put a mat on his desk for the night,
we could put a mat on our table and sleep.

Ah, but then a cafe would be home.
Lots of people live
on the sidewalk already,
and most of them don't like it.

Maybe what we need then is a home,
and a home away from home, too.

Max Reif

California Open Space

If I sit just so,
I can almost pretend
no human has ever
come this way before.

The houses are behind my back
or hidden in the branches
of this grove beside the stream.

The hills beyond are soothing to my eyes,
burnished golden by the sun,
some almost red
this late in summer.

Birds twitter, breezes rustle prairie grass.
A ring-necked pheasant,
as from some 18th century painting,
flies up into a tree as I come by.

But for the sounds of cars,
a lawn-mower, and a plane,

this might be wilderness.

(.....10sept3)

Max Reif

Call To Battle

The day I was born,
phantoms took my balls hostage.
They also took half my brain.

In exchange, I received
membership in their family,

but what kind of family is that?
All my life I've settled for shit,
the only reward being
that I wasn't completely alone!

I'm tired of that now:
I'm looking for my sword.

I need both my balls
and all of my brain,

and You, God,
leading me to freedom
in slow and bleeding steps —

when I sever any knot
that binds me to the false —
let me hear You cheer!

Max Reif

Canada, 1971

We travelled across Canada that summer,
and one night we stayed with a couple—
Sault Ste. Marie? Sudbury?

I don't remember how we met them.

Very spiritual they were, and I,
still on my spiritual honeymoon.

The fellow was Catholic, and he
had Novena candles burning,
dozens of them, all over the apartment,
and I wondered what sort of guilt
he was trying to obviate.

They had a little girl. Was he
secretly wanting to leave?

Question: how many external candles
does it take to obviate
an internal guilt?

Answer: can't be done.

Max Reif

Capitulation

I've resisted the intrusion
of technology into my life —
more than some,
not as much as others,

but this morning,
getting out of my car

while juggling a cellphone,
a digital camera
and a new, stiletto car key,

as another, dead cellphone
bulged against my pocket

and my laptop weighed me down
in the bag hanging
from my shoulder,

I realized that I've lost.

Max Reif

Circus Visions

A young woman balances
en pointe on one foot
atop a man's head.
Then gracefully, she
turns a full circle.

A little later, a torch, lighted at both ends,
flies onto the stage from the wing,
A man catches it
and proceeds to make
flame his tango partner.

A keystone cop fire brigade comes out.
They use their hoses as long jump ropes
before getting completely tangled up in them.

Meanwhile, an S & M policewoman
at the front of the stage
rotates a girl's jump-rope
'round her body faster
than my amazed eye can follow.

Whole groups dive through hoops,
toss silver pins at rapid fire.
By the finale,
the quickest way
between two points
is not walking,
but a full-body flip.

We in the audience see a world
whose laws seem not to be our laws.
Such miracles do surgery to our eyes,
removing cobwebs of unconscious life.

We see a Dali world, full-blown upon the stage—
never the years of arduous labor
that brought that world to birth.

Collecting Paradises

I sit in the garden
of the Sunflower Cafe',
here in Sonoma, California,
listening to the slow
trickling of water from the womb
of the old, ceramic fountain,
as from a place before birth

on this springgreen, sunsmile
early April day, green fountain
of a date palm rising up
behind me, and slow trickle
of a few diners' voices swimming
lazy into the pool of sound,
and I think:

All my life
I have tried
to collect paradises
to make them last — to live
in the Garden and never leave —

like the time Ed came
into my little bedroom in Denver
as I was reading Rumi
upon a new Indian bedspread,
leaning on a Persian pillow,
music in the air and flowers
I'd picked myself in a big vase,

and speechless for a moment,
he finally said:
'It's like a *paradise* in here! '

And I thought, that's *good*,
but he meant, I'm pretty sure,
that we have to face
the world as it is,

we can't escape
into paradises.

To be sure,
that one didn't last:
a few weeks later
I left Denver feeling homeless,
walking and howling in shadows,

but any time I can
I try again,
and some day I'll have paddled
up the rivers of life to the Source,
and will plant my flag in that Garden,
and never leave.

Max Reif

Creation

The others noticed
a growth on his head,
getting larger daily.
They watched it. In a couple weeks
they recognized he was growing
another head, then a body
began to emerge beneath it,
then feet, and one day
it climbed down
off the first one
and walked away.

Max Reif

Dad's Holiday Riffs For The Kids

A larger-than-life, bright red sled,
trimmed with gold and the word 'Santa Claus'
in big letters over the seat,
sits, cheery to a fault,
on a front porch I drive by each day

where for a month before Halloween
a life-sized effigy
of a crazed man stood,
shirt soaked red,
chainsaw in his outstretched hand

Max Reif

December Epiphany

On my way to the laundry room just now,
the sky already darkening at 4 pm,
the pale moon had sailed up
alongside the oak with the huge canopy
of yellow leaves resembling a teardrop.

Suddenly the world
was reduced to simple beauty.

My heart broke
that I could only greet it,
shoulder my bag of clean clothes,
and return to face
another complicated week.

Max Reif

Delmar Loop Revelation

He opened the apartment
door and I went in
and plunged
into an Ocean. My life
went floating by like scraps
of stuff on foam and waves,
some beautiful, some not.
The Silence roared. Don't know
how long I stayed. Back on the street,
old ladies in babuschkas and
young ones in jeans
walked back and forth
like tongues of bells
as snow came down,
the news that Peace
had been proclaimed.

Max Reif

Demolition

The demolition crews are out,
And twice this week, I saw
Crunching into brick and steel,
A huge crane's T-rex maw.

And, as God speaks through symbols
That mirror truths within,
The jaws of mighty Shiva
Are what I I *feel* I've seen,

A vision forged in brick and steel
For me to contemplate
Processes of death and birth
Directly immanent.

Tomorrow there'll be rubble
Where the building stood today.
And after that, some trucks will come
And haul the stuff away.

Then the construction men will come.
A scaffold will arise.
Then, in a year, the opening
Of some new enterprise.

The skyline of the mind
Adjusts to what we see.
I'll scarce be able to recall
The way it used to be.

Max Reif

Desire

Audrey played in the sandbox,
Alone with a red, plastic fish.
Ryan grabbed it to take it away,
Wanting to play with it, too,
And neither child would even consider
The blue plastic fish that lay nearby,
Right in the same sandbox.

I told them, 'You'll have to take turns,
Five minutes each with the red plastic fish.
I'll start keeping track on my watch.'

The next question to answer, of course:
Who would get the fish first?
Few small children ever want to go second,
There's only one time, and that's 'Now'.

I told Audrey, 'You've had it already
For quite a long, long time,
And now it's time to give Ryan his turn.
Five minutes won't be a long wait.'

She threw herself face down on the sand
As soon as I gave him the fish,
Weeping and wailing like someone bereft
Until his 5 minutes were up.

As soon as the fish was back in her hands,
Audrey cooed, eyes dilated in bliss.
She put the fish in a bright blue bucket
Of water, and lovingly fed it sand.

Ryan was happily distracted,
So I said nothing at all
Until ten minutes later, when he walked up
And asked me, 'Hey, where's my fish? '

Again Audrey dissolved in tears
As soon as the fish was gone,

Beating her fists and mourning until
It safely returned to her pail.

That was the way it went the whole morning.
I could neither disturb Audrey's fish heaven,
Nor relieve her time in hell.

Max Reif

Ding-Dong, The Ads Are Gone: We Poems Are Thankful!

I speak for all the poems here
in thanking the management
for removing the ads
that were draining off our blood.

For example, when a poet
used the phrase 'grapes of wrath',
the words appeared in blue
and a click took the reader
off, off, to an ad for a video,
an anger management program —
who knows what?

I'm a poem, I don't go off reading ads,
I'm complete in myself

but suddenly, well how would it feel
if your veins, the blue blood vessels
inside you, were siphoned off somewhere?
Would you like that?

We poems didn't like it either.
We like to think
we have integrity.

I thought I was going crazy,
couldn't hold a thought.

Now it's back to how it was:
I can stand quietly,
like a tree in an ancient grove,

until someone comes to contemplate me,
walking all around me in a leisurely way
while standing in my embracing shade.

Disillusionment

The train had come far toward its destination,
although the route was not the one he'd dreamed.
At first, yes: mountains, cities, oceans, friends.
Then, vast expanse of dusty, arid plains
connecting small, unmemorable stations
where strangers neither smiled nor spoke to him.
The rhythm of the wheels lulled him toward sleep,
his only wish, the tedious journey's end.

Max Reif

Dream, Ambition

I long to walk the world
without a single care,
down every street in innocence,
entranced by ordinary miracles —

spring blossoms on the trees,
the dead lead skies'
life-giving rain,

and by the enigmatic street itself,
this trance of street
awaiting every passerby,

each one trailing the mystery:
<i>where have we come from,
where are we, where
are we going? </i>

I'd graze and drink
like an animal
without reflective memory,

and live within the world,
a visitor
on an aesthetic mission —

to contemplate all that I see,
refining, tamping down, until

I'm left with but
an essence — joy.

Max Reif

Early (A Sonnet)

I died in sleep. Back now before the dawn,
Let's see if I can brave the winds of time
And be *ennobled* by my deeds —no pawn
Stuck fast in atavistic habits' slime.

The brew of life's the same in a new cup!
What can I do today that I could not?
For starters, the world sleeps and I am up
To contemplate anew the drama's plot.

A veteran of many wars of days,
I know my army's strengths and how it fights.
Command your forces, will! Pass through that maze!
Do battle with the enemy on the heights!

Alas, more is required than I intend:
It's with my own weaknesses I contend!

Max Reif

Egypt, February 11,2011

The Roar goes on and does not abate.
It is the roar of the Ocean
that most of the time we can't hear;
perhaps it's the sound of '2384; .

We tune in
as if it is our own life,
which it is-
the drama
you can't see
too many times:
the tyrant toppled,
the old order upended;
Time, the dictator, overturned
in the ecstatic Present;
the Bad Father in each of us banished
so the children there may safely play,

Obama elected,
the Berlin Wall down,
Soviet Union gone,
Mandela out of prison;
now Egypt free!

Yes, the future
will betray
this moment
time and again,

but the step
has been taken.
Humanity lurches,
tiptoes-
no, dances

forward

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Max Reif

Enchantment

In quest of the Rose,
the hero ambles.
Brashly he goes,
entangled by brambles

more and more thick,
choking out light.
He feels a prick,
then onset of night.

He lies asleep
upon a bier.
The forest is deep.
Who will come here?

Max Reif

English As The National Language?

Belligerent interviewer on NPR
talking to a rep from Hispanic culture
about 'English As the National Language',

quoting George Will: 'But the national
<i>conversation</i> is in English! '
Well, maybe for George Will
it is— but how many
languages does <i>he</i> think in?

With every question, the Hispanic
interviewee is on the defensive,
has to be <i>so</i> deferential and articulate,

but finally, he gets his point (politely) in:
<i>'This is the only country
where some consider
knowing <i>one</i> language, superior
to knowing two or three! ' </i>Pow,

and what if America gave tax credits
or student loan breaks for learning
new languages—for learning,
doing, being <i>anything</i> new,

what would <i>that</i> do
to the cobwebs of calcified
society and thought?

Max Reif

Facing Reality

At some point,
if you gain
the weight,

you have
to get
the bigger
p a n t s

Max Reif

Faint Lotus

Faint lotus,
your outline
appearing in the sun,

my clumsiness
could keep
your buds from opening,

your roots
from finding soil
and taking hold
here in our world,

but faith repairs
what error's done.

You come
from the Invisible,
where you exist
as archetype.

May you become
the template
of my life.

Max Reif

Fathers And Sons (1976) Br(Alternate Title: A Hymn To God The Father)

Your voice is like grinding gears,
like a great thunder on the plains,
like steel crushing against steel.

You speak from a tower—from that pulpit
your words come down to the world.
I stand in awe of you, high priest!

Your wrath, o god the father,
has me trembling with fear,
shaking with remorse,
bristling with anger of my own.

Surely you are the terrible god,
the god of the scorched-earth days,
of blood-requiring sacrifice!

Surely you are the god of vengeance, the one
who led the children of israel to war.

How can my soft words be heard by such a god?
My whispers trembled onto the shoulder of a lamb
would be blown 10 million miles away
by the hot breath of such a god.

This is the god who has turned away,
at whom we shake in fear because our love has failed.
This is the god who rules our life
until we have paid the price of redemption in blood,
and the Son comes between us to shade the sweltering heat.

Surely you are the stone-faced, angry god
in whom our wrongs are avenged,
the god who loves to kill!

O mighty warrior, smite me
and shine on me and burn

me into ash. Destroy me and
parch my bones as they lie in the sun.

Take all I have to give,
and when you have parched my bones,
then take my bones as well.

All of myself your wrath may eat, o god the father!
All of myself your angry bowels may digest and excrete!
All of my bones your hairy arms may bludgeon,
All of my veins your heavy sword may slash,

And I will cry out in my dismembering,
and I shall rise in the desert sun and dance,
my shattered limbs dangling madly,
my vessels sprinkling blood in fountains
that shoot upward toward the sun
and spill down onto the desert sand,
my face in a hideous laugh turned to you!

Your game I will play by your rules,
I will take your punishment,
but I shall live!

In the desert sun,
dancing like a broken man,
I shall live!

Max Reif

Feeling The Bite

If every part of the body
Received the professional attention
Garnered by our teeth,
We'd all be in the poorhouse!

From general dentist
To endodontist
To periodontist and back
I've been bouncing like a pinball
While my banker keeps the score.

Dreams of travel,
New cars, home repair
Recede from my sight
Like mirages

As I contemplate
The specter of
An entire life
Lived to support
My teeth!

Max Reif

Feet

Everywhere,
feet upon the same earth,
like the bases of trees
going down to deep roots,

the small pads of soles,
the tiny parts of the body's surface
that alone touch the ground,
supporting our whole frame.

See how every stride
gains traction from the earth,
how working together, two feet
can take a person onward
in a straight line forever.

Watching feet striding,
I see the cantilevered
systems of muscles
working together,
moving the body along,
arms swinging,
the dance of walking.

I do not see
the mind that wills,
the operator in the machine,
nor the map of where
the feet are going, or why.

The spirit, sensed through eye-windows
and muscle tone, remains invisible.
One footsoldier doing the bidding of a soul
stops at one shop, one at another.
in this world of vast possibilities.

Max Reif

Fishing For Poems

I love to go fishing for poems,
out into the world with no agenda
and follow my nose, walk or drive
or sometimes even dance
to where I can feel
the poems will be biting.

Then all I need to do
is sit there lazy
with a line
tied to my bare foot,

and they come, they come,
eager for the bait
of my unbusied mind,

knowing they are safe,
that I will give them back
more lovely than ever,
pristine
as the day God made them.

Max Reif

Found Poem: Today's Headlines From Yahoo News

Rescuers race to free trapped submarine,
Space shuttle undocks, heads for home,
Passenger jet goes down in sea off Sicily,
Hiroshima marks atomic bomb anniversary,
British government defends crackdown plan,
Typhoon batters China, 1.24 million evacuated,
Mel Gibson asked to stage Christ's crucifixion.

Max Reif

Friction

the body
moving in space through time
(aging)

the mind
churning gears of thought

tension
<i>the timeless world
the world of time</i>

Pierre Bonnard, I learned yesterday,
enshrined his aging, difficult wife
as a youthful goddess in paintings
depicting their home as Paradise:

a state he lived in,
or aspired to?

The artist speaks
to the figure in the Grecian urn,
the Byzantine mosaic:

"Tell me your secret! "
and then recoils—
Am I talking to my own creations?

No, no, he shakes his head.
It's you I'm speaking to,
O Soul behind the world—
so near, so far.

Max Reif

Froggy's Lunchbox

Froggy woke up early and in bed he lay,
Wonderin' what he'd take to school for lunch today.
Mama came into his room to said,
"Here's your lunchbox, Froggy. Now please get out of bed."

Froggy washed and dressed and ate breakfast fast.
Then he picked up his lunchbox and headed down the path—
Headed for school, when he had a thought:
<i>"I'll just take a little peek inside and see what I've got."</i>

Froggy opened up his lunchbox and he took a look.
He saw string cheese, a sandwich, a treat and some fruit.
He said, 'I'll take a <i>tiny</i> bite. No one will ever know.
Then I'll get right up and straight to school I'll go.'

A little while later, Froggy gets to school.
His teacher says, "You're right on time, that's real cool.
What's in your lunchbox, Froggy? Let me see."
Then she opens Froggie's lunchbox. It's completely EMPTY!

Max Reif

George W. Bush-The Play

We wake up already
in the theater,
where the plays are running
but the last acts are not yet
written.

We've developed great interest
in the main character of one,
a man named George W. Bush.

We've watched his boundless
confidence—brashness? — in action:

first the invasion, then the 'Mission Accomplished'
landing on the aircraft carrier,
then the whole thing falling apart.

But the air of his confidence
continues. Does he know
something we don't?
Does he really hear
the still, small Voice?

And how will it all end for him,
with some kind of whimper,
or a bang that breaks through
even that poker face?

Max Reif

Gettysburg*

1.

We grew up taking America for granted,
America, land of plenty
of toys and TV and all-
you-can-eat fried chicken,

where every day at school
we pledged allegiance
to the flag on the wall,
'and to the Republic, for which it stands, '
which was *not* on the wall
and not so easy to see.

America, too, the family
that fed me well
and loved me as well
as it knew how.

2.

Many years
and follies later, and hopefully wiser,
we were taking another look
at where we'd come from,

and we started learning about Gettysburg,
which all of us knew was important,
though not all of us knew why.

Some of us saw the battle now
magically enacted through cinema,
God's favorite way these days
of showing us the vital past,

and some, in the cinema
of the mind's eye,
prompted by books or documents.

We found something many
had not reckoned on — that war
can sometimes be more than the wrong-headed choices
made by old men, not as smart or aware as we.

A battlefield can be a crucible
of ideas in collision,
on which God's judgments
are written forth in blood.

3.

'Those who dive
into the fire
find cool water.'
—Rumi

And so we came to Gettysburg,
got off the bus
and walked the roads in Remembrance.

We stood on Little Round Top
where Colonel Chamberlain,
his men all out of ammunition,
ordered them to charge down the hill
with bayonets fixed and a battle cry,
directly into enemy fire,
and carried the day on sheer courage.

We passed the fields where General Pickett
led his brigade on its brave, doomed mission,
marching straight toward the Yankee hellfire
raining down from the hill.

We walked the pleasant woods
where on such a walk that day,
the slightest rustle of a branch
could precede a stab of cold, sharp steel
or a blast of deadly fire.

One of our party closed his eyes,

and the sounds he heard
were like a unit marching,
with many feet in step.

And everywhere, the hills and thickets
that had seen heroic deeds
threw out a question:
'could *you* do that? '

inducing meditation
on sacrifice and ideals.

The ridges became
the walls of the crucible,
and our lives
were thrown into the mix,

and out of the mix came two visions.
One was a front line of battle,
the other a so-called time of peace.
The brave in both scenes were dying,
dying to limitation,
dying to self-centered living.
Only one scene was painted with blood,
but the dying in both was the same.

4.

After the battle,
two voices of prophets
stood out from the rest,
ringing exceptionally clear:

the voice of Abraham —
the second Abraham — his grief
for every fallen footsoldier
etched into his weary face

bespoke the sacred seal of union,
a seal of fire and blood.

And another, mighty voice

proclaimed in words of Holy Fire
the nature of such a battle
when witnessed by a higher Eye

Max Reif

Gifted Child

I came up to our preschool classroom
with my guitar, just in time
to do Circle. The children
were filing out the door
to line up and greet one of the teachers.
All except for Ryan. I found him
in the block corner, where he'd taken
all the blocks off the shelves,
all the plastic animals from the cabinet,
all the little metal cars and fire engines,
and made a giant Highway, a great circle,
a Mandala, for you Jungians,

and he sat in the middle of it, self-satisfied on his knees,
and it appeared to me he'd harnessed
all the primitive power of the jungle
and all the power of the machine age
and had them lined up to do his bidding
along the circular Highway of Life,
which he could reach any point of
from his place in the center.

And I told him to 'clean it up'.
Shame, shame
(but there wasn't time!)
and as he usually does,
he squealed, 'Nooooo! '
(and I didn't have my camera, either!)
which really is a problem,
his thinking he's always right,
(I thought about leaving the whole
magic thing up, but the other kids
would never have come to Circle) .

A couple weeks ago,
I had a dream of Ryan,
draining all his family's energy
and attention with his need
so there was none left for his sister,

and all he wanted in the dream
was to go to Berkeley, to a park,
and join an acting/tai-chi class there,

and in the dream I took him
and then he was fine,
immediately got immersed in the class.

'Gifted' children can be so difficult,
I used to be one,
and I hope I can make it up to Ryan
(without giving carte-blanche
to the little tyrant in him)
and start validating his gifts
in a more empowering way
than mine were.

Max Reif

Gleanings From The Wise

Our world is an island in a great Ocean;
We touch its shore in our crossings, again and again,
Each time forgetting we've been here before.
Everyone bears some invisible burden; no one's slate is clean.
Every day is a triumph for some, a disaster for others.
All we can do is try to be kind.

Max Reif

Go, Greyhound!

Sending off a package Greyhound Express,
I congratulated myself to have remembered
this is the cheapest way to send things,

then wandered through the outdoor
waiting area of the Bus Depot
in search of a door that would
lead inside to the Men's Room.

My breathing went shallow
as I picked my way
among stooped-over travelers,

'lowest of the low',
almost like a refugee
camp or a leper colony —

their only real affront being
they can't afford
more upscale means
of getting where they need to go.

Max Reif

God And The World

God is a traffic cop
conducting a mad symphony
in the busiest intersection,
wildly tooting his whistle
and gleefully waving his arms
at all manner of vehicles rushing by—
and the crazier the driver, the better!

Max Reif

Golden Child

To you, mother, I was
a great man
in his boyhood.

Married to someone you'd
realized you could not talk to,
in a domestic prison
in a city you did not know
with a young, dependant child,
how alone you must have felt!

Who would deliver you
but that same, golden son?
He had to be
someone great.

Seeded by your desire,
he believed he was,

and will never feel at peace
until the whole world
sees him the way you did.

Max Reif

Google Pilgrimage

Drove down to Mountain View this morning
to check up on my investment
of time, and a *little* money,
in the Google octopus.

Like a friend in a strange country,
the familiar rainbow letters
smiled from the logo
in front of the building.

Eyes sparkling,
the red-haired receptionist
in the lobby smiled, too.

'Is there a display
for the public?' I asked,
reining in my wonder,
to find some kind of voice.

'Do you have a *meeting* here?'
she inquired, the wattage
of her eye-sparkle
going down fast.

'Is this the main lobby? '
I asked, bewildered.
'Don't people come here
from all over the world? '
There had to be more than this.

'No, and if you *don't*
have a meeting here,
I'll have to ask you
to leave!' said the girl.

I pushed my way out the door,
muttering something
about the famous Google motto,
'Do no evil',

and puzzled how
a bonanza company
can be so dumb
about public relations.

Max Reif

Google Pilgrimage Fiasco

Drove down to Mountain View this morning
to check up on my investment
of time, and a *little* money
in the Google octopus.

Like a friend in a strange country,
the familiar rainbow letters
smiled from the logo
in front of the building.

Eyes sparkling,
the red-haired receptionist
in the lobby smiled, too.

'Is there a display
for the public?' I asked,
reining in my wonder
and finding some kind of voice.

'Do you have a meeting here? '
she inquired, not quite as many
watts now in the sparkling
of her eyes.

'Is this the main lobby?' I asked.
'Don't people come here
from all over the world? '
There had to be more than this.

'No, and if you don't
have a meeting here,
I'll have to ask you
to leave!' said the girl.

Muttering something
about 'Do no evil',
the famous Google motto,

I pushed my way out the door,
puzzled how a bonanza company
can be so dumb about public relations.

Max Reif

Gratefully III

The cough-spasms linger,
the illness lingers
and secretly I'm glad it lingers
because I need a parenthesis
to shield me from 'daily life',
which robs me of joy
and places the burden
of obligation upon my shoulders,
making it impossible
for me to look up or to skip lightly.

My mind googles incessantly
yet so far comes up with no plan
for meeting needs
without lowering the crushing burden.

I enjoy this parenthetical existence
as if floating on a cloud
or down a river upon a lotus—
princely in my bed,
at peace with all

Max Reif

Greek Drama

Their bedroom lay in perfect symmetry,
A mythic stage. The double bed was flanked
on each side by a dresser, lamp and closet.
She'd spout her lines from her side, he from his.

Some trivial thing seemed always to begin it:
'How can you wear that jacket with those pants? ' —
Or, 'Can't you wear your hair all the way back? '
(His mother wore her hair all the way back.)

Annoyance soon gave way to full-blown rage.
Backing toward her closet as she shouted,
She opened it one day, for ammunition,
And started hurling purses from the shelf.

Clear, hard-plastic scored a direct hit
Upon his forehead. Down he fell, and lay
Like a crashed airplane in a lonely field.
I stood above his body. Was he dead?
Soon, though, he woke, stood up, and went to work.

That night, we all had mom's pot roast for supper.
Not a word about the morning's 'little tiff'.

Max Reif

Half Mast

The flags have been drooping at half mast
for more than a week now,
and I don't read the papers enough to know
if we're still mourning Gerald Ford or James Brown,

or some generic loss of innocence
they're finally getting around
to commemorating.

Max Reif

Happy Birthday, Nikki

I liked the patches
on the back of your jeans,
and almost before I knew it,
we were together.

That was 1971.
November 10 still never passes
without my remembering it's your birthday

even though at the time
I thought I might be just in it for the lust
that was driving me crazy;
even though I was on anti-depressants;
even though walking to the bank
in South Bend in the winter sun
the morning after our first night,
I realized I had no idea how to live.

I have the picture of you
and your 2 year-old cherub,
lovely madonna and child,
he's almost middle-aged now.

Gifts you gave me still endure,
even material ones,
the Judy Collins Songbook
and the antique candle-holder Mom has.

Saw you in the early '90s
driving through there,
we met for breakfast,
you looked great.

I wrote you afterward,
you never replied,
but at least you knew how I felt.

That night in San Mateo
when I made you get out

to catch your plane,
of course I didn't want to do it.
Took me a year and a half
to come out of the depression
after stopping the pills
because on them I felt
I couldn't really be there for you.

If I'd been a lot more myself,
who knows? But every year
like clockwork, November 10,
I remember.

Max Reif

He Is A Hymn Of Freedom

I pictured a man of 75,
but that was his address, not his age.
He was younger than me,
eternal twinkle in the eye,
whiskers on his chin.
Sipping coffee and munching
on the patio of the donut store
there in the vast sea
of shopping center asphalt,
he told me again the saga
that had brought him from Saudia Arabia,
where he had worked as practically a slave,
to these streets of Los Angeles
in a year, this man I never thought I'd see
on this side of the world,
my dear friend, Nimal.

Max Reif

He Waits

He waits,
the great seducer,
won't let you see him,

wears a myriad of disguises
and goes to great inconvenience
to hide behind trees and bushes
all your life,

because if you saw him
even for a second,
you would go mad,

and so he waits
until your legs
are solid
anchors on the earth,

and then he steps out

Max Reif

Her Blue Jeans

Jeans pulled over slim legs,
then proud, wide hips,
the button's crisp snap
and she's ready

to parade out into the world,
through the door of a cafe or store,
all seamed in, hips riveted,

knowing the back view
will take care of itself
as she faces the business
and pleasantries of the day.

(.....25aug)

Max Reif

Hickory Pit, Saturday,9 Am

Beloved God, I thank You for
this symphony of breakfast,

for the coffee
You have poured
straight into my cup
from Central American highlands,
Hawaiian sugar fields,
and some California cow;

for the oatmeal pressed from grain
waving somewhere in our country,
and butter maybe from a friend
of that same cow, and raisins
from down Fresno way,

and for the scrambled eggwhites,
free of wicked yolks,
but yellow just the same,

all an expression
of Your Divine Perfection.
Help me see for once
that same Perfection
in the rest of my day,
Amen.

Max Reif

His Coffee

Without the taste of coffee
lingering on the tongue,
titrating into the cells-
would the world be complete?

(.....25aug2)

Max Reif

Hit In The Head By An Alp Horn

Hit in the head by an Alp Horn,
that's what's the matter with me.
Hit in the head by an Alp Horn
in nineteen ninety-three.

I couldn't have known what would happen
as I tried to walk around
that guy in the lederhosen
blowin' out that mighty sound.

Since then, I can't even remember
my name or where I've been,
but I sure as hell can yodel now,
so I've gone on the road with him.

We make a pretty fair living
in many a Swiss canton.
and when he's not blowing his Alp Horn,
he cares for me like a son.

Max Reif

Hoodia-Winked

Those people selling
Hoodia, 'the life-changing
appetite suppressant'
on the Internet
in a thousand nonsensically
or misleadingly titled e-mails

bring up in me
the Protestant Ethic,
even though I'm not a Protestant.

*'You people think
you can get something for nothing! '*
shouts a loud voice in my head,

though I have to admit
there's a smaller voice
echoing that one with
'Well, *can* you? '

Max Reif

How Can A Stream Of Thought On A Page Convey The Essence Of Multi-Dimensional Life?

Because the world
is itself a work of art,
a framework meant
to convey Truth.

When you go
to the movies,
you come away
with the essence
of the movie.

When you're
born on earth,
you have
your seat
in the theater,

and even though
it's a little more complicated
because you're also
an Actor in this movie,

you come away
with a whiff of the Theme,

and you keep
coming back
to the theater
until you've been
in the theater
so long,
you've lost 'yourself'
and *become*
the essence of the Theme.

Max Reif

How?

And how can all the blood
that pours from wars,
the stain of all the greed,
and hate's black shadow

disappear without a trace
into a Divine Ocean
that stays completely pure

and washes every dawning,
virgin second
fresh and clean?

Max Reif

Hurricane Poem

The hurricane hits,
You batten down your hatches,
Try to secure everything.

It's all a big mess.
Hurricanes don't
Respect our boundaries!

Soon you're just trying to survive,
Holed up in a small, safe room.
You doze off. When you awake,
Everything is still. You venture outside.

You gape, speechless!
The hurricane has taken
All you've ever known
And re-arranged it,
Leaving it perfect, resplendent:
The beauty you've always dreamed of!

Max Reif

Hym To Night

I bear the griefs of time.
I feel the scars of breath
and lean upon my cane,
bent by the heavy years.

A small wound, freshly hacked
as in the twisted trunk
of some old olive tree
by a clean, kindly blade —

a clean, kind blade of words
that sang upon the breeze —

has drawn forth hidden sap
and turned my mind in pain.

But cool air bites my skin,
soft sunlight through the trees,
shadows on verdant lawns,
and fountain's steady splash
all take away the sting.

O Night, you've cleansed the world!
Your daily sacrament
allows my living heart
to love another day.

Max Reif

I Refuse To Be 'Maxwell'*

I refuse to be 'Maxwell',
Though that is my name.
When mom called me that,
Was she playing some game?

Maxwell was her father,
Who died just before
I came into the world
Through her open front door.

This custom of sticking
Old names on a tot,
Thus saddling them down,
I think it is not

Quite fair! Who's she see,
When she calls me by name?
Does she see me or *him*?
To her, are we the same?

'Max' sounds like a boxer.
I'm not quite one of those.
But I'm not my dead grandpa!
They leave no other choice.

Max Reif

If Saints Baked Cookies...

Ms. Michal is baking cookies
with a dozen preschool 'helpers'
seated around the table.

'Who wants to add the oats? '
asks her kind, bright voice.
'I want to do it! ' one girl's voice sings,
words echoed a second later
by the girl next to her, and then
by the girl next to *her*.

'Can I put in the vanilla? '
a boy's refrain repeats
at brief intervals until he's answered,
using that ancient technique small people
have evolved to get needs met.

Ms. Michal has led the children
through a dozen steps
of pouring, mixing,
squishing butter and sugar into one,
and measuring egg substitute
in teaspoons because
of one girl's allergy to eggs.

At every step there has been fairness,
some equivalence of stirs and pours:
each time there's not, a squeaky wheel
has squeaked and gotten greased.

Ms. Michal gives aesthetic
and spiritual dimensions due, as well.
She passes the small, dark vanilla bottle
around, for everyone to get a whiff.
When one girl drops it on the floor —
such things to be expected —
she calmly says, 'Please pick it up
and pass it on.' And then,

holding the silver bowl of batter up,
and tilting it, she says, 'Now for the most
important part. We need to add some love! '
We each open our heart and pour
its contents in, invisibly.

'Now how about some laughter? That's
another way of showing love! ' We
aim guffaws into the bowl.

Each child shapes a cookie,
then goes on to other work.
The table slowly empties.

Outdoors, awhile later,
as the children sit
on quilts upon the sunlit grass,

behold! The ingredients,
preceded by sentinels of aroma,
appear again —
small, flat hunks of unity.
Ms. Michal's lessons
are deliciously absorbed.

Max Reif

If We Could See The Mind

The eye provides a poor, simplistic view,
the outside of a person going by
or living with us, sharing bed and home:
red hair, a pretty face and form
or fat gut, grizzled face, unkempt.
But ah, if we could see the mind,
we'd see each person is not one or two —
not me, that fellow over there, or you.
The mind's a bobbin, rolling to extremes,
converging in the middle, wobbling back,
and what makes the impression is the *mean*: .
A person is a quilt, an in-between.

Max Reif

In Dream Country

Walking the dirt road to the beach,
I hear a faint sound up ahead.
It grows in volume
as I move toward its source,
recognizing mournful cries.

Rounding the bend,
I see in the distance
white shapes
on a black background,

right where long ago I surprised
a bull alligator taking a nap
and he roared, just like a lion.

Four swans, buried up to their long, slim necks,
try to free themselves from the mud.
Their heart-piercing cries give voice
to the pain of all suffering beings.

Frozen in my steps,
I watch them struggle.
Who will free the swans,
Oh, who will free the swans?

Max Reif

In Front Of The Locked Library Doors

Before the locked
library doors we supplicate,
the scruffy lot of us,

the man with the crazed eyes,
the coyote-hungry man,
the rotund man with the silver beard.

Why do they have to wait
till opening time
to open? Couldn't

they make an exception,
as soon as they come in?

But something
in the make-up of life
stands on such formalities,

lest librarians start rising
earlier and earlier
and the Earth itself
violate its 365-day contract
and fly off into chaos

Max Reif

In Meditation

The thoughts that come and go
as I sit in meditation,
like a buddha
carved into a cliffside:

workers who can build
a city of ideals
or an army of barbarians.

Max Reif

In The Ironic World

In the ironic world,
sunlight falls
first upon a mirror before
reflecting to our Earth.

Thoughts are buried,
not spoken, and grow
into strange trees
with mutated fruits.
Even the air

goes somewhere
before our nostrils,
I can feel it. How I long

for naive, direct days that vanished
beneath the waves with the heroes

and are waiting
within my heart
to be re-born!

Max Reif

In The Play Yard

Supervising the small children,
I glance at my watch to see
How long until my break.
My eyes see boys
Maneuvering tiny boats
In a clear, plastic tub in the sandbox:
<i>They</i> see a mighty harbor to navigate,
Traffic moving everywhere
Too important a job for them
To look up even for a second.
I try in vain to see through their eyes,
To know the immediacy,
That I envy so.

Max Reif

In The Shadows

There was something I was thinking
in the shadows between
words that flowed from my pen,

it was like a photo
and a negative, but in
those shadowed silences
all the truth of my life,
and life, was hidden,

went moving
from tree to tree, hiding
behind trunks in a thick forest,

and I continued to scrawl
the vine of words onto the page,
wondering how to flush out
and capture what welled up
in what I was not saying,
could not yet say.

Max Reif

Inscrutable Border

At the boundary
of heaven and hell,
infiltration goes on
in both directions
all the time,

though the barrier
is so well-policed
that the strongest fists
can't even make a dent,
an army of howling sinners
can't budge it an inch.

Walking down College Avenue
in the drizzling rain just now
after the dance class,

I realized I'd slipped
into a realm of quiet joy,

yet I recall the suffocating
curtain I wore for self-protection
at last night's gathering
and couldn't take off.

I don't remember seeing any gate
to mark a passage
between metaphysical opposites,
not even a sign.

Even extremes —
So close, so close,
they almost overlap.

I

Max Reif

Invoking The Gods Of My Youth (Written In 1984)

Stan Musial,
Stand by me in my sleep,
Protect me,
Make the mudra* of Peace to drive away
The monsters of the night.

Go from your restaurant of day
To don your heroic guise once more
And be my guide
To take me back,
Through the pathways of my ages,

Along that winding stair,
To a green-walled vision
Nestled at Grand and Dodier streets,

In a sleezy northside neighborhood,
The crowd pouring along the street,
The hotdog vendors and the scorecard hawkers,
Hands held up, with grizzled faces,
In their Cardinal jackets.

Inside that enclave,
Is the myth still re-enacted
In a world we do not see?

In the outfield there's Bill Virdon,
And dark-browed Wally Moon,
And fleet Curt Flood—

Kenny Boyer at third base
And Javier at second;
Well-traveled Alvin Dark at short.
The catcher is Hal Smith,
In his strange, shamanic garb,

And you at first, o Donora gazelle,
Chained, like Prometheus,
To a base, forbidden to wander

The outfield pastures
Because your legs are gone.

On the mound we have wine-dark Bob Gibson,
Larry Jackson, Lindy McDaniel
And his flashy brother, Von,
Who came full-blown from youth
Without the minor leagues,
And Wilmer, "Winegar Bend" Mizell,

And in the dugout, looming like a dark ship on the sea,
Eddie Stanky, Solly Hemus, and Fred Hutchinson,
Each briefly, for the team
Could never win a game.

The knights of legend come to town for battle,
Questing 'round the land:
"Big Klu" of mighty muscles, and the Duke,
whose secret is his avocado farm,
and "Newc",
and Jewish Sandy Koufax,
who will not pitch on Sabbath;
Hank Aaron and the "Say-Hey Kid",

And rumored heroes whom
We never get to see,
Who don't make it to our city:
Al Kaline, kneeling on his baseball card
Upon his long, heraldic bat,
And Ted, of Boston, Williams;
Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford.

I remember, Stash,
When you were thirty-nine,
And the 'Birds were way behind,
In the late innings,
The shadows deepening on the field,
And you came to bat,
Like Mighty Casey at the plate.

I said to the guy behind us,
"The Man can do it."

You crouched into your stance,
And went into your dance,
And drove the stitched, white pellet from the park,
And the sadness from the crowd.

The guy behind us smiled. "I said
The Man could do it, " I rejoined,
And I felt emotion's chill,
And victory's thrill,
As he, my dad and I
Stood united,
Three in one.

I invoke your lineage,
Your forbears in earlier mythology—
Dizzy Dean and Christy Mathewson,
Walter "Big Train" Johnson, and "The Babe";
Ty Cobb, who slid in with spikes flying,
And Rube Waddell, who they'd find
Off with the firemen somewhere, putting out a blaze
When it was his turn to pitch,

And back in the dawns of time,
Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, New York;
And before that, cricket,
And before that, who knows what?

Protect me, Stash, so that
I may see the new Stadium
Not as a wilderness
Of "lumpen", plastic grass and beer,

But may be whole and find
The old color
In Tomorrow's Game.

Max Reif

Jeremy

I wonder if he's even
alive today, the poet

a crazy megalomaniac I knew
introduced me to back in the late '80s,

Jeremy, the poet
who in the two years I knew him
was in more mental institutions
than anyone I'd ever met.

On the phone he was a gentle,
sensitive soul, a little younger than me
and with a spiritual curiosity
he needed to be a little careful about,
but nonetheless genuine.

He'd call at two in the morning sometimes —
I'd hear from him every month or two —
and after awhile I wouldn't mind,

as he'd read a poem he'd written,
or make childlike observations
about things he'd seen or done.

Why do they keep locking up
this gifted, sensitive soul,
I'd wonder after hanging up,

and after a year or so, I decided
to meet him in New York City.
We went to a cafe and he talked,
about the way he had on the phone.
I liked the way he seemed to look
up to me, it made me feel
like an elder poet, who wouldn't
like to feel like someone's mentor?

Then we went outside

and walked down 3rd Avenue,
and I saw: he was like a child
who wanted to touch

everything he saw. He talked to
drunks and bums and prostitutes,
rich people and middle-class
mothers pushing strollers,

he couldn't keep his mind off anyone.
It was way beyond 'childlike innocence',
it was a disease, he'd never be able to live,
some guy could kill him,
he had no discrimination whatever,

and that was the day I learned why
the 'magical child' within us all
needs a grown-up around sometimes.

Max Reif

Jimmy (Re-Edited Version)

Straight down the middle of the sidewalk
16 year-old Jimmy would stride
every afternoon in his red baseball cap,

eyes locked straight forward too,
oblivious of traffic, the people sitting
at the sidewalk cafes, the windows of shops,

and then one day the public works guys
came with their jackhammers
and broke up the sidewalk
for around thirty feet
into big, jagged rocks,

and when Jimmy came along that day
he didn't know what to do,
and froze.

I got up from my table
and went over to him,
and he came and talked awhile
with my girl friend and me,

then was able to continue
on his way home,
safely on the other side of the abyss.

Max Reif

Kaiser Hospital, Walnut Creek

This time it was not *quite* 'nothing',
and hearing that, the patient felt a little glow
of relief spread through his body. He was not
imagining things. He noted a desire
to give in completely, collapse, grab
the doctor's coat and say
'Please take care of me! ',

to give himself
into someone's care
and be relieved
of the lonely march
down the long corridor of days
to the beat of an alien drum.

Max Reif

Labors

Reaching out my hand,
I grasp the cold and solid glass,
while all around me life revolves
dreamlike in time and in space.

What I can be certain of
ends at my fingertips.
(Today the carol music plays;
tomorrow, spring buds will swell.
Today my hair is peppered grey,
tomorrow it will be white.)

I sit and labor here.
From these labors,
a world is born.
I walk into that world,
and from it will bear another.

Solid hand upon the solid glass,
all else writ
as if a dream,

and one that yields not
to my conscious will.

And so I do another kind
of labor for my raiment,
down from all enchanted realms,
become a beast of burden
carrying my dreams upon my back.

With one foot in my dreams
and one foot in the solid world,
I try to bring the two to one,
and keep from being pulled apart.

Max Reif

Last Night And This Morning

In the aesthetic symmetry
Of last night's domestic tiff,
We sat at the glass coffee-table

On the white, right-angled sofas
In our beautiful living room,
Preparing to read aloud from
Our friend's new book of poems.

Opening the book, you mentioned
My fingerprint smudging the page.
In that milieu of heightened
Language and aesthetics,

We were off on a linguistic
Battle of our own.
Who knows whether I was right

To belabor your few words
With my feeling that they betrayed
Strong resentments you bore within?

Your words' prints on the air,
Like my finger marks on the page,
I'm not equipped to read.

My memory, playing back
Our verbal parries and thrusts
Finds blurred ambiguity
In everything that ensued.

Emotion was leading the blind,
Something inside us both
Stirred by your trifling comment
And my equally brief reply.

After enduring the pain
That always comes in the train
Of a lovers' quarrel like this,

The burning became too much
And our hearts began their journey
Back to each other again.

Curious how, in healing,
Though our words began at odds,
Their rhythm brought us together
As last night's led us apart.

I got your e-mail this morning
With its pink, exuberant hearts
Gushing like a symphony

And I pour back the Music to you.
"May we learn from this! " is my prayer—
One that I know you share.

Max Reif

Last Night's Dream

Again, in the middle
of the game
with no clue
how it's played,
even after
seeing it demonstrated.

Again the panic,
because everyone's
required to play,

and the anger,
because it doesn't
seem fair,

and once more
opting out
in the throes
of my emotional spasms,

and not knowing
if I really *can't* play
or am using the
turbulence of my feelings
as some kind of excuse.

Max Reif

Law Of Accelerating Precision

Practicing desires,
we become so precise.

'62% decaf
& 38% regular! '

I said
to the barrista
this morning,

and she and I
and the guy
behind me
had a good laugh,

knowing it's all too real,

that demanding devil
inside us.

Max Reif

Life Is Perfect Sometimes

Glorious long days
hang from the sun until dark,
beauty stacked upon beauty
and all of it for Love.

Vast prairie of day
with another one to follow,
the trees burning fires in the sky.

Time is a lazy, tame horse
and leisure a profession.

No imperative exists
but to drift like a cloud
through the sky of my day,
doing whatever I love.

Max Reif

Limits

In my 30's I wrote a book of poems
all about infinite possibility.
A friend's dad, a doctor,
read them and said:

'You feel now
like you have boundless energy,
you think you can do anything,
but all that will change someday.'
I thought, how sad
the man is so defeated.

Today I came home
from 8 hours of work
and I just don't have
the zest to read or write.

I can't do everything,
I'm realizing.
Infinite possibility
and finite energy
=(sigh)
limits.

To do the infinite
will take a little longer
than I'd thought.

Max Reif

Lines About My Father

He did not so much abandon me, as himself.
His rage blew out of places that had never known life.

So quickly he turned from 'Daddy' into Father,
the cold and distant, angry 'god the Father'—

One evening at the theater, he turned to me,
Muttering, 'You're a dreamer! ', spitting out contempt.

Yes, a dreamer—with no solid ground to stand on,
nothing to make a world from, but dreams.

The world comes out of Mother and extends to Father.
That's all the child knows of solid ground.
If it's *not* solid, he falls in an abyss.
From there, it's true, his only hope's in dreams;
and thus is born a madman or an artist.

Max Reif

Lines Written On A Paper Bag While Waiting For My Wife

Things were not so old, once.
'Ivy' meant the ivy
on my parents' front porch—

now it means
science and metaphysics,
all the ivy there's ever been,
and where it came from.

I guess it all has something
to do with Home,

having one and leaving it,
and then trying to find it

everywhere

Max Reif

Listening To Baseball In The Nevada Desert

You know the joy
of scanning radio stations
while driving a vast,
uninhabited area at night,

picking up faraway voices
talking only to you...

I just tuned into
a baseball game somewhere,
the crack of a bat,
the cheers of a crowd,

an announcer's voice
drunk on the game —
'the ball drops in for a hit! ' —

like Harry Caray
all those years in St. Louis,
bringing me on radio wings
the news that really mattered,

the news only poets
can deliver today

Max Reif

Looking Out The Window During Class

Oh distant hills,
I long to lie
upon your supple curves
and rest.

Beyond this world
you beckon me,
but I cannot come to
you, yet.

Max Reif

Love

Love made me naked
and burned away dross,
but its exquisite pain
was a fever
that hurt
like crucifixion.

Love's touch upon my surface
made it dissolve and open up,
and showed the pain
still underneath its grassy glades,
where earlier still
there had been only
moonlike craters.

Love made me turn
my dark side up
and expose it to the Light
(and agony in every moment
of my beloved's glance and touch) ,

made me show myself
(first to her alone)

and made me turn my soul
so I became a new,
a golden man,
reaching for her
until I might never
have to reach again,

but on the way
it hurt like Fire

Max Reif

Love Letters In A Vault

Love letters in a vault,
never delivered,
never even written.

Beneath the maze,
the shattered mirror image,
down the rabbit-hole,

into the false self.
My personality
was just a band-aid
over a black abyss
where great beasts did battle.

Beneath it all, a tiny baby
crouches in the shadow of the beasts.
That is who I am,
not this mouth
that births broad rivers of words,

not even this pen.
Can this pen
voice the cries
of a child who cannot speak?

Can the pen
adopt the child?
Find him a home,
find him trust?

The child can't trust,
he kneels in the shadows
where the great beasts roar,

how will his voice ever be heard
from down that well

through the false light
refracted off shattered shards of self,

up through the many voices,
voices of steel,
voices of glass,
voices of water,
voices of stone,
voices of cities?

The voice of a child's heart
is a faint strain,
pleading

Max Reif

Lover's Complaint

I don't know how
a God so loving
can be so stern.

Nothing I've read
that purports to explain it
does so to my satisfaction.

Of course 'my' satisfaction
is just the point. You say
<i>that</i> 'me' is an impostor,
a leering mask
who's convinced everyone
he's the genuine article,

the self, and You, the real Self
are just watching the show,
patiently waiting.

But I don't know how
to reconcile all this
with the sweet
beauty of Creation

that is like Your Smile
saying 'I love you, this
is all My Gift to you',

that leaves me smiling too
to be a part of it all,
and feeling natural
and beautiful and included,

and then the next second
You have me putting
my shoulder to some
alien-feeling grindstone,
implying if I take it off,

or even want to,
or if I complain like this,
I don't really love You...

Max Reif

Manifesto To God

I want Heaven On Earth
to be my brand name,
I want to be a full distributor.

That's what I want
pouring out of my cup
to everyone I talk to,
everyone I e-mail,
everyone I touch.

That's the only product
I want to handle,
because I see it's so close,

I see it in the green of every palm tree,
in the lovely color of blue
chosen for our sky,
and in the life-giving rain.

I don't read the papers,
let them keep putting out their bad news,
sooner or later people will wise up,

they'll come to where
milk and honey are always flowing,
drink the sweet milk
at the coconut's center
instead of choking
on its hairy husk.

It's not my brand, God, it's yours,
it's not like I'm trying to take credit,
you're the sole bottler and manufacturer,
I only want a franchise,
I just want to move that bliss,
and work for you, Big Guy, forever

Max Reif

Manifesto To Myself

I am a part of this Humanity
caught between the angels and the apes.
In the grid of my own life
all my weaknesses ambush me,
and there is nowhere I can go
where they will not follow.

I trade blow after blow with my surroundings,
like Israeli and Palestinian,
who continue to soak
the ground with their blood
rather than relinquish
their litany of claims
and trail of grievances.

When will I overthrow my history's shadow
and meet the immediate world around me
as the theater and battleground
of my own transformation?

Blame, you have ridden sentinel,
you have had my ear long enough.
Self, cutting your confident path,
turn around and see its tornado wake!

Outward-fixed blindness that mimics sight,
when will you turn and look clearly at yourself?
Dark habits, you think you belong
simply because you are so entrenched!

How long to go on sowing the seeds of pain
in my own environs, and then play victim?
How long contribute to the trickster's brew
whose spell institutionalizes oblivion?

How long? As many blows as it takes
to stop manufacturing new verbal prescriptions
too rosy to apply in the stink of living
as many as necessary to feel

every cell's ultimate weariness
and finally cry, 'Enough'!

Max Reif

Meditation And The Power Of The Mind

Three or four repetitions
of a mental picture
of the location

as I walk toward a building
from a parking lot,
and I'll remember, later,
where I've parked my car.

It's taking considerably
longer to remember
where I've parked
my soul.

Max Reif

Memorial Day Riff In Downtown Oakland

Because today is a holiday,
I'm walking all over Oakland,
the place about which Getrude Stein said,
'There isn't any *there* there, '

and I even came across that very quote
in a book over lunch, right here in Oakland—
a lot of those little coincidences lately—

but there *is* a 'here' here, and armed
with my digital camera in one hand,
my silver harmonica in the other,
I aim to prove it and maybe I'll
celebrate some of the city's rhythms, too.

At first I'm taking pictures of every flowering
tree on the streets behind Lake Merrit,
bougainvillea and a stand of banana trees,
some unknown tropical plant with a jungle trunk
like an elephant that has lamprey eels attached,
the pythecanthicus about to open,

and more pictures, of the mysterious fresco
above the columns of the Scottish Rite Temple,
and *all* the 'there' around Lake Merrit
with its strung colored lights and distant hills
that feel as much like Italy as California.

Then I turn a corner
and suddenly Italy's gone,
except for the rundown part of Rome
near the train station
where I saw a guy
shooting up once while he sat
on an ancient, wooden staircase,

and the *heat* here in downtown Oakland
is shooting back from the asphalt now
and from the sidewalk that sparkles

like a preschooler poured
glitter there when it was wet,
but that heat's still a merry heat
that still hasn't gone over 80 yet this year.

Now, silver camera still in my right hand,
there's nothing to shoot any more
because I don't care to take
depression-era photos
of stark signs saying HOTEL,

but in my left hand, my \$5 Blues Band harp
is starting to call my name, and I play
'They Tried To Tell Us We're Too Young'
and 'In The Still Of The Night' as I walk, and then

as I turn a corner, I see a very dark-skinned
man in shades motioning and he says,
'Hey, come over here and play with us! '
and he waves me into a small parking lot
with BB King blaring from a boombox on a chair
beside a baby carriage that has a *big teddy bear* in it!

Not wanting to disappoint the man,
I start to play, and I'm lucky, old BB's
playin' in the key of C, and I jam
as though I play with bands all the time,

it's fun, if you're in the right key
almost anything works,
and I make a note there seems to be
enough universal truth in that thought
to practically get a person through life.

A tall, skinny old dark-skinned man
in overalls and shades comes over then
and starts rummaging behind the teddy bear
in the carriage, and after a whole two minutes or so,

pulls out a wooden recorder, nice wood,
about as skinny as *he* looks, and starts
playin' Coltrane-like riffs, and I let go

of whatever inhibition
I'm still holdin' onto,

and this uptight white guy
is suddenly a jazz musician
with the brothers and a few sisters
standin' around their cooler
of beer and cheerin' us on,

and this *is* a holiday,
which means Holy Day, I realize
the same way I realized only today
that 'Amateur' means
'what you do for Love',

and I thank you, my harmonica,
for being my passport and translator
to the wide world, and I swear with you two
silver wands in my hands and this book bag
slung over my shoulder,

I'm about ready to just set off
and start walkin' around the world

Max Reif

Mother At The Beach, 1939

When Mother was a young girl,
what would she have felt
to be shown how her life would turn out—

her husband and sons,
and how things went with the family,

later a grandchild dead at 13,
four surviving to bring in
still another generation?

When she was on the beach, say,
in Atlantic City in that picture from the '30s,
skin fair and fresh as apple flesh,
looking into the camera
like a comet at a sky
it's about to cross?

Could she have seen
the crone she is at 85,
Or leaving her beloved east coast
for a life in the midwest?

I don't think so. Nor
the dignity life has conferred upon her
through hard choices
and tears.

Max Reif

Mumbai Memories, 1983

We slept on the floor at Victoria Station, Bombay,
that old gothic, wedding-cake cathedral of a building
from the raj, my friend Adi and I. He'd started crying

as I'd passed, wearing a Meher Baba button, walking
on the streets of Colaba by the Arabian Sea. Told me

he'd grown up with Meher Baba's nephews in Pune,
they used to steal the shoes of people
who came for Darshan (Blessing) , that he'd

become separated by time and his habit,
his heroin habit, that had him on the street.

He remembered 'B im-Bom-Bay', the Pat Boone
song I sang to him, and I was surprised
it had also been popular over there.

He was a Parsee, looked like he might have
gone to my high school in America, and then

been through a few tough years. You know
how you meet someone once in a great while,
and you both feel like you've known one another before.

In some cases, you may never see one another again, either,
and in this case that was true. My passport had been stolen
as I'd tried to leave the country after my Pilgrimage —
that was the only plausible explanation for its being gone

when I'd come back to the ticket counter, having walked back
across the terminal to pay the Airport Tax I'd forgotten about.

That was an adventure: the thing that gets me
is how unsafe I was, how I survived adventure
after adventure in my youth. Not long after,

I had a dream I was losing blood, and I knew

if I 'lost' much more vital essence through fooling around,

I'd be done for. And here I am at 58,
solid as a bank.

Max Reif

Music History

I played arpeggios for Mrs. Aranda,
who smelled so good
and came to our house every week.
She had a giant, blue vase
on the stone front porch
of her Spanish house
past which I'd walk sometimes,
a neighborhood away,
and a tall, dark son
with a different last name,
who wore black
leather jackets to our school.

I learned to play 'Star Dust' by heart,
the memory of which remains in my fingers
for some mysterious reason
long after 'The Poor People Of Paris',
Chopin's 'Nocturne', Tchaikovsky's
'Concerto in E Flat Minor',
and 'The Paradise Waltz' have all
dissolved into dust in my brain.

One week I hid
in the bookcase when she came,
and when caught,
refused to play my scales —
consistent with my record
of practice during the week.
We fought to a draw. I never did
play the scales, but when she left I missed
her perfume and her face.

Maybe that day was why
a little later in my memory
dad was driving us
every week to Miss Gilbert's,
in a drab duplex in the City,
where my brother and I took turns
at the upright, half an hour each,

while someone we never got to see
shuffled in the next room,
hidden behind a green curtain,
and dad waited in the car.

By the time I was twelve
my parents gave up,
and I never had to come home to practice again
and was free
to roam the baseball field
until the sun went down.

Max Reif

Muslims Display The Victory Symbol, Holding A Photo Of Osama Ben Laden

These people,
who look like good people,
like people I pass every day,

smile and give thumbs-up
as they hold to the camera a photo
of the man who masterminded murder
of thousands just like them.

The Absurd is never a stranger
in the brutal Theater of War:

Israel destroys Beirut
to find a few needles in its haystack,
but would they understand someone
levelling *<i>* their *</i>* neighborhood,
to look for a few 'bad apples'?

Would they feel that justified
the loved ones blown apart,
the screams and amputations?

But these Israeli soldiers,
whose grandparents died at Auschwitz,
have a trust to protect their people
so that horror won't happen again.

Once you start rolling back history
to look for a first, just cause,
you reach the beginning of time —

meanwhile, there are new
provocations, and the carnage
goes on,
until...

My Moment Has Come

A famous poet
comes to a big hotel,
and I'm there.

As she reads, I'm supremely
confident about showcasing
my talent for her in a little while.

Finally, she indicates us,
the audience, with a broad
sweep of her arm:
'Now I'd like to see
what *you* can do! '

Intoxicated with confidence,
I move nearer to her,
biding my time. Nothing
comes to me to recite,
but it will, it will.

She goes on talking. Still
nothing. Then a few
lines sift into my head.
I begin to recite aloud:

'*Come to the edge, he said!*'
I passionately intone. A young man
sitting behind the poet
knows this short piece
by Apollinaire, with which
my longer poem begins,

and starts reciting it with me:
'*They said, We are afraid!*'
I tell the fellow to shush.

But the famous poet's attention
is elsewhere now. I'm drowned out
in the general din and chatter.

My face burning red, I leave
and go home to mother.

Max Reif

My Mountain

From the hills
I could see my mountain
standing like their elder brother,

and then I went
down into the city
and I saw my mountain
stretching upward like a reminder.

From across the far river
another side of my mountain
speaks a new, strange language,

and even from the sea
my mountain rises up
like the crown some great island.

In the shadow
of my mountain today,
I saw the backs
of workers bent double.

My mountain
startled my eyes this morning
with a pink shawl
around her shoulders,
for yesterday
her garment had been grey.

I think I have seen every color
winking from my mountain's eye,
and at times my mountain,
playing with me,
even disappears,

and it is then
that I see her
the clearest.

note: this poem is inspired by Mount Diablo in northern California.

Max Reif

Natural? Supernatural?

On my morning walk
through a suburban neighborhood,
I have to use the bathroom—*bad*!

Suddenly, in a front yard
up ahead, a Porta-Potty!
Modern miracle? ...

Max Reif

Nature

The trees were angels this morning,
seeming to bend their variegated boughs
to bestow benediction upon my weary brow
as I walked out my front door,

and driving along the hilly, back road
I wanted to stop and merge forever
into the misty autumn landscape,

for that peace is all
I could ever hope to become.

Max Reif

Navigating The Hidden Currents

As each individual object and being
swims in the hidden tides and currents
that are the flux of the actual
world behind solid appearances,

let us not be caught up
in collective pathways,
heavily traveled but perhaps
oblivious of destination
and even of the journey itself,

but seek only
to find our way
Home, to that place
where we can live
a life uniquely
ourselves.

Max Reif

Nearer My God To Thee

What possessed us
to be so calm,
the frigid ocean below
about to take us in its jaws?

We were not extraordinary men,
not particularly religious men,

but when our minds
saw what was coming,
we gathered as one
and began to play.

A friend had told me
how once after his orchestra
played the Pastoral Symphony
the members had to shake their heads
to dispel the notion
that they were in the middle of a forest.

So we all were seized
by a great calm,
already not of this world.
The music became a bridge
over the waters,
over time and space,
over what we know as death,

which still you walk on
as you hum the melody.

Max Reif

New, Improved Oath Of Office For The President Of The United States

'I do solemnly swear
that I will faithfully execute
the office of President
of the United States,

and will to the best
of my ability,
preserve, protect and defend
the Constitution of the United States,

and take on
the psychological projections
of 300 million Americans,
and to a great extent,
the other 6 billion
people in the world, too'

Max Reif

'No Direction Home', Scorsese's Dylan Documentary

light a match
hold it out
wherever you are

you are watching
the biography
of yourself

bear witness
bear witness silently

Max Reif

O Loud And Silent Moon

The moon exploded
over our hill tonight

and quickly floated
up like a small balloon.

Does anyone know
how Silence
can shout so loud,

then a moment later,
press an elegant
finger to its lips

and show you all
you'll ever want to know?

Max Reif

Oasis

A cup of chai,
An outdoor table
Sheltered from
The rain,

Brief refuge
From procession
In the endless
Human caravan.

I sit and sip.
My ancient eyes
Begin to rise.

One needs to sip
Existence now and then:
Tomorrow I'll strap on
My burden and resume
My place in the parade.

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Max Reif

Obligation

In the dead museum
obligation sits, rusting,
a suit of armor
we only just found out
contains a living man.

Why has he been
so quiet all these years?
Why did he just
stand there,
arms at his sides?

A little oil,
and the joints
begin to move.

He takes a step,
lurches off his pedestal,
clanks crazily
toward the front door.

Sounds of frantic
scraping from inside.
He shakes the arm guards,
they clang upon the floor.
He tries to run,
leggings rattling,
pulls the helmet off.

Standing in the doorway
he is gulping
fresh air like a fish.
Young, eager, free,
he races out
into the sunlight.

Max Reif

Ode To My Pen

My pen moves, its trail
A flow of energy.
Its loops and stems
Remind me of
A living, growing vine.

Life streams.
My penpoint dances,
Mimicing and mirroring
All Being in its ballet.

Its nib's wise, protean flow
Traces two lovers' longings
Or a pilgrim's love for God—
A pigeon strutting by a bench—
Far journeys of the mind.

Oh, pen,
You are so supple!
Diverse the energies
You move, the pictures
That you paint
Through language,
That Miracle.

You can contain the blazing sun
Or a description of
Minute atomic particles
In your amazing point.

Your stream flows on and on.
It lubricates all life,
As the writer at his table
Rides across Creation
Upon your sliding ball,
And even shares
His dreams with all.

Yes, pen, you're a great

Instrument, enabling the whole
World to read my mind!
I'll never doubt again
Your sled of ink
Sliding 'cross white pages
Like a toboggan on the snow.

A thought—invisible—
You let be seen!
And, ferryman, you also
Bring it from its nesting place
In grey folds of my brain
To the white boat of a page,
Where millions may receive it.

2

Will you ever empty
My mind of thoughts
That grow like hairs,
No sooner harvested
Than springing up again?

What, pen?
That's not Your job,
You say?

You're disappointing me.
I thought that you
Knew everything!

What's that?
You're just a tool,
A puppet? When
I lay you on the table,
You become an inert thing?

You only know
What you receive
From me?

Well, pen:
Who, then,

Am I?

I know
What you
Are going
To say!

I am His instrument,
His puppet,
The same way
That you're mine!

Without Him,
I too am
A piece
Of inert stuff.

It's He Who writes
The poem of my life
With His own Hand.

When I write well,
He uses me
The same way
I use you!

And you, too,
Pen, are Blessed then—
By His thoughts
Coursing through your
Doubly-borrowed life.

(1999)

Max Reif

Ode To The Salad Bar

The salad bar
Has seen its day,
But now it has
Become passe'.

I drive for miles
In search of one,
Since restaurants' fling
With them is done.

You'll find one here,
You'll find one there,
Like bones of dinosaur—
That rare.

Fast food joints had them
As a fad
Now they're right back
To food that's bad.

I miss you, scallions,
Bits of cheese,
And ah, I miss
Sunflower seeds.

Adieu, adieu,
My salad days!
With you I wish
I could still graze.

Max Reif

Ode To The Tree Outside My Window

O tree outside
my window,
with your yellowgreen
lettucelike leaves,
swishing bells
in the spring breeze,

I breathe
your breath
and you breathe mine,
a holy symbiosis.

You give life to my
exhausted flesh and spirit
as I lie upon my bed.

I do not know your Secret.
You must contain
some great Secret,
touched by a divine wand.

No wonder the Druids
worshipped you,
simplicity itself
beneath and mingling
with the sacred sky,
all but forgotten
in the asphalt world,

your great, bearded head
buried below ground,
your long limbs
a ballet in the breeze,

some great Secret
in your hoary
vegetable brain,

your life so

unlike my life

yet joining me
through unseen
capillaries in the air,

blessing me and making
my life so much more tolerable
with even a glance at you
than if were you not here.

O tree outside my window,
accept my human
words of thanks.

Max Reif

Odometer

I remember how
my new Mazda 626
flew over the road
as I watched the odometer
turn over its first mile:
my car had punched in
on its life's time clock.

Five years later 99,000
more miles have turned,
imperceptibly, one by one:
you hardly feel a thing each time,

yet now the unholstery's matted
with some congealed,
unidentifiable stuff;
the frame is slightly
dented in a couple places;
some mold smell
wafts up from under a seat;
and I've had to throw
the carpets away altogether.
How did all this happen, I wonder?

And then the thought occurs:
from the moment of birth,
our bodies' meters
are running, too.

Max Reif

Office Hope

A reasonable human being
surely ought to burn down
his or her house
every five years or so,

when the proliferation of paper
becomes so suffocating that,
cleaning one's office, a few sheets
go into the waste basket

while the rest join dozens
of piles mentally labelled
'To File' or 'Uncertain Whether To Save or Throw Out'.

Writing this, a thought comes
like a plant growing through cement:
some people may have
file draws that actually function
and still have room in them,

and I feel like a sinner
in hell, looking up, feeling
for the first time, hope.

Max Reif

On A Visit To St. Louis, My Home Town

Driving the mystic
Mandala of the city,
I'm an electron,
Everywhere at once
And only a trail

Max Reif

On Being Fifteen In 1962

We ran the earthly pastures then,
The alleyways, the city park.
Spurning the sunlit paths of men,
We found pure wonder after dark.

On garbage cans we leapt and sang
In shadows of dark tenements.
Our West Side Story voices rang,
Transporting us past worldly sense.

We crossed the park in deepest night,
Stammering out philosophy
Love, pain-derived — hard-won insight,
While cooling currents breathed us free.

The Holy Grail of youth we bore
In innocence toward manhood's door.

Max Reif

On Memorizing A Poem

"In the beginning was the Word."

Creation is involved here,
not just "print-on-a-page"!

These are flowers
of the ages,

Nor can you clip them
and stuff them
in a mental vase.
You have to plant them,
inside!

First-reading scatters
the seeds of words,
atoms whirling with life,
even the ones that seem inert.

Then: repetition
becomes the steady hand
holding the watering can.

Imperceptibly,
every word sprouts.
Tendrils grow,
reach out, join hands, join

a clause, a sentence. Finally,
each word so tropically bonded
it no longer exists alone.

A stanza coheres. The force
flows on,
new critical mass,
the spirit leaps
across the gap to the next stanza,
back to the one before!

Every reading, connections firmer.
New ones arise, flourish

like bougainvillea. Roads appear.
Signs. Turn Left Here.
Paths and gardens of knowing
form in the brain.
Flowering vines
climb up in the air,
perfume it, & above the brain!

Finally, a world
lives inside to be invoked,
called forth like a genie.

Every poem or story
made one's own
initiates its keeper
into a long line
stretching back
to ancient campfires.

Every teller chants with Homer,
Valmiki, bards whose names
we do not know- carries
this Light in eyes

onward

Max Reif

On The Bart (Revision)

Oh, to be a stranger in a strange city,
travelling with no destination,
at home inside myself
and looking, looking.

I don't know what I'd be looking for—
my eyes, my eyes,
the hills in the distance and white buildings
helping me find them, just like today.

A bay and a clear sky and a few palms,
people speaking some language I don't know,
but friendly, and a few I can talk to,
or maybe learning their language this time.

Oh, to be a stranger,
arriving for the first time
in the unknown
city of my own thoughts.

Max Reif

On With The Game

On a baseball team
after 45 years —
not even baseball, really,
its handicapped cousin,
slow-pitch softball,

effortlessness
does not come easy.
On the field, my body
still leans with each pitch,
instinctive as a rabbit,
toward where
the batter's swing points,

but my arm won't get the ball
all the way from third to first,
the fly balls wobble in my field
of vision as I chase them,
and at bat sometimes
I hit pop flies —
because I dropp my shoulder,
a helpful teammate said.

The past two Sundays
in our practice games,
the premonition in my belly
turned out a truthful augury —
I was chosen last,
a catastrophe I never
had to deal with as a boy.

The guys are friendly.
It's not high-pressure sport,
to say the least.

But in America, each time
a man walks out
onto a baseball field,

he bears a world of skills
and instincts, or their lack,
and gains admission to the tribe —
its social world, not just the game — or not.

I think of how our old coach
used to tell my boyhood neighbor,
'You throw just like a girl! '
and how that boy's trek
out to center field each inning
must have felt like miles to him.

I never thought
about it much, though,
not till now.

Max Reif

Once

Once the buffalo
roamed the plains
by the millions, and once

flocks of passenger pigeons
blackened our skies, and the salmon
ran so thick in the Klamath River
you could reach your hand in
and pull one out, and once

there were forests
of magazines
where a writer could make
a buck with his stories and poems...

Max Reif

One Way A Child Learns

Maybe I learned about the Holocaust
from grandpa, when he made me
cross out Hitler's picture
on the German stamps in my album.

Every generation,
collective memory dulls.

We were reformed Jews
living in consumer paradise
light years from genocide,

the only imprint of that past
being the pull of the old ones'
unnamed emotions,

the hush in the room sometimes,
when a child knew
there was only one way
he was permitted to feel

Max Reif

Original Whim

Original Whim of God
that surged in the darkness
of the beginningless beginning,

blow my boat
across the created waters,
shape-shifting through the dazzling
array of this Madhatter's
tea-party of a world

in which forms finding
their own way to God
become props and furniture
in the world of other forms,
all floating in the Divine.

Blow me in mirth
through the Funhouse of Creation
to the mirror image of my Original Face,
and let me gaze
until the mirror shatters
in Realization

Max Reif

Out Of All The Endless Days

I'd live my life in shorthand,
the short hand of a poem,
a zen brush painting.

Ah, the endless repetitions,
the rising, getting dressed,
going to the same workplace,
the weekends, blah blah,

and now and then a flash of something new,
a moment that leaves the procession,
flies up to the hills,

something worth writing about,
something that seems
worth God's time

Max Reif

Out Of The Abyss

The trap door opened.
I fell into the pit.

After ten days,
vacation was ending.

You know how it is:
a buffer zone,
stands between you
and the resumption
of mundane responsibilities,

and in that interlude you create
a magical kingdom and endow it with
the illusion of permanence.

Six days across the sea
of time till the boat
reaches the other shore,
it seems like an eternity —

but now, only two days left...
and now, it's tomorrow!

And after a mostly boring
last-hurran outing
to a nearby mountain-top,

the truth comes home:
<i>this kingdom never was, </i>
and now, even as an illusion,
it's about to end.

Mad with grief,
I come home from the mountain-top.
Snakes of conflict raging in my heart,
I go to bed —

The contradictions I wrestle with
render my life impossible.
The shrinking ground I stand on
will be gone tomorrow
like snow in warming sun.

The alternative to my
fortified, dissolving kingdom
is intolerable:
it means I'm a failure!

And yet, as I survey
the situation over and over,
the truth is inescapable:

no one is going
to buy and publish
my stories, art and poems
and make them my livelihood
in the next 24 hours.

I have to be satisfied
to be a creative vehicle
for the sake of the process,
for truth, and beauty
and my own need.

I have no
<i>professional</i> recognition.

But this fact left only
the horror of my 'day job',
latest in a lifetime
of day jobs.

How could I
do it any more?

Does God not care?
Are not all things possible?

I prayed, thankful for the steady

stream of pain
that guaranteed sincerity.
I prayed in a *fever* of prayer

for a long time, and I looked up
and found myself
still in the pit,
sheer walls all around,

and the numbers on
my digital clock
kept turning over.

I could not go,
I could not face tomorrow —

and then,
I took a step
back, somehow,

and I looked up again,
and I saw a ridiculous man
braying at the mirror!

Who am I
to give ultimatums
about what I will
and will not
accept from life?

That is the way
of madness.

I said to myself,
'God hears my prayers.
This must be
the way He wants it, '

and I said,
'*I surrender any desire
to have it any different
than it is.*'

Suddenly I was out of the pit,
with no more fevered obsession,
ready to lift my load tomorrow
all in a day's work.

Max Reif

Paradise Lost, Again

Another Saturday morning
and the image of yellow
eggbeaters obedient on a plate
rises in my mind
like a sun.

Soon, in quiet eagerness
I drive the back way
over the winding road
amid wooded, upscale houses,
my two quarters in my pocket

and then, CHRONICLE under one arm,
faux-butter spray in my hand,
I walk through the glass doors
like gates to paradise,
down the aisle to my usual
place at the end of the counter.

The waitresses are standing
in a little group, talking
like the maids
in "Upstairs, Downstairs".

When I first came, months ago,
they were deferentially
anonymous in their black pants
and white shirts, serving me

my perfect breakfast perfectly,
careful to leave intact
my cultivated self-image: mysterious writer,
detached observer, too important
to be disturbed, but throwing out
"thank yous" and polite,
mildly personal questions
like handkerchiefs dropped
by royalty.

Ah, that was a breakfast
to remember! Over the weeks
their personalities began to emerge
until now, in the little
Noh drama, the little
tea ceremony between us,
I sometimes see them
as rebellious natives
and catch myself wishing
for a general
who could restore order.

These days I always wait
until they've finished *their* conversation.
Today, the one who "has" me
and the other counter customers
brought me a only a *small* water
with a few paltry cubes of ice,

though I must say she remembered
my order, as most of them do
now that I'm a "regular".

Her mind was on her
conversation with Lady,
tall and looking well-bred,
whom I think I heard
telling someone it's her last day—
whose family's just bought a home—
I couldn't hear where—
and has just learned the fine print
in their contract says
they also have to buy
Homeowner's Insurance.

Lady's name
in *m*y mind is Blanche,
wife of an evicted
plantation owner,
who had to get her delicate
hands dirty and go back to work.
I've always been too shy

to ask how it was
they lost their fortune.

A guy slides in
two seats away at the counter,
looks mischievously
at the server carrying
a big tray over to a table,
and shouts, "I get a better
waitress over here! "

His voice has
that tone of familiarity
used by the contractors
and construction workers
who come every morning,
that I, the "studious son"
in this big family,
don't know how to access.

I get out my glasses,
put my fake butter on the table,
and start to read.

The eggs, oatmeal and coffee
are still the perfect
start of a day,
veritable works of visual
and culinary art,

but now as I eat
it's not like it once was —
I'm in a fallen world.

Everyone knows
I'm just a poor guy
trying to buy a mirror
that will reflect him back
the way he wants to see himself,

and I'm wondering as I read
whether I'm still getting

enough pleasure here

or whether it might be time
to start the whole charade
over again, someplace else.

(...01july7)

Max Reif

Paradise: A Sonnet

I've visited a paradise or two,
or made them, with a few brave, kindred souls.
But something always seemed to go askew;
each house of Vision's brick was pocked with holes.

I could not make the walls so dense to keep
impermanence or discontent away.
The only seeds I had, and sowed, would reap
a mixed and blemished crop that did not pay,

and finally, I fled each paradise,
though others' lives went on and maybe some
have truly found a Temple of the Wise,
with wisdom that has not yet to me come.

My own dreams yielded to some trickster's play.
Perhaps, when dreams have all been ripped away...

Max Reif

Perils Of The Open Sea

Every Odysseus-of-us,
sailing home to our own Ithaca
must surely succumb, it seems,
to the whirlpools and traps of the journey
across life's perilous oean
in consciousness' small boat.

An eye-blink of relative peace
freed from one entrapment
not yet ensnared by the next,
is the best most humans can hope for,

or maybe imprisonment
by a fairly benign captor
within or outside us,
instead of a vicious sadist.

I've seen a few mighty heroes
meet the open sea's perils
by raising a powerful hand
and uttering Sacred Names
that turned the dragons away
like frightened, yelping pups —

But that has not
been my fate.

Max Reif

Persimmons

How did persimmons
get that reputation
for puckering your mouth?

When ripe,
they're sweet
as mangoes.

Should *any* of us
be judged
before we're ripe?

Max Reif

Philosophical Question

I check my website stats each morning
to see what people, and machines,
have been there drinking at my pool.

I also have a Guestbook on my site.
Some days I find a note
that leaves me glowing like
a warm hand's held my hand,
or someone's hugged me.

But those stats! They say a guy
in Omaha, and someone in Mumbai
have been there, and I even know
what pages have been looked at.
Yet these people haven't written in.
Did they absorb a thing?
What did they love? What did they hate?

It's like the question posed
by Bishop Berkeley, that you study
in Philosophy: a tree falls
in the forest, and no one's
there to hear — so, is it real?

Max Reif

Picture Of Confidence

In Bermuda
shorts on a cold morning
he wheeled his shopping cart,
a little recklessly,
up to the side
door of the cafe',

pulled out a stainless
steel, covered mug
and splashed the steaming, old
coffee into the gutter,

then came in for a refill.
Long, straight hair shining,
a smile lit his face
as if all of us
warm, secure people
should envy him.

He came out of nowhere,
got his coffee,
and was gone
with the cart,

humming into the cold
morning air.

Max Reif

Piedmont Avenue

I long for a place that's lived in,
that's stood as a sculpture,
steady, weathering the winds
while people come and go.

I long for the traffic pattern on the street,
movement amid the stationary
sentinels with their secrets,

a place where no two people,
or person coming on repeat visits
will ever see the same thing,

as the stream of cars,
the pedestrians, the pigeons
on the roofs, the objects
in the shops all flow and change
in the great river of Time.

Max Reif

Pig

Walking near home,
North Carolina tobacco country,

I came upon a great sow,
must've weighed a ton or more,
dusty, pink and human-like
and so afraid of me,
cringing there in the dust
where she was rooting
as I tried to reach out and pet her.

I could see her struggle,
wanting me to come close
but not quite able to trust.

Oh, piggie, I thought,
Your owner's beaten you,
and you can't come
out of your shell,

and sadly, all I could do
was utter some loving words,
throw the dear a kiss,

and continue on my way.

Max Reif

Pilgrimage

It's 1959—I'm eleven.
Dad's just closed
The furniture store for good.

He says we're going to have
A family meeting.
My brother Fred and I
Enter the dining room, puzzled—
Our family's never *met* this way before.

"Boys, we've got a little
Money from the store's sale, '
Says our dad. 'Your mom and I both feel
That now, before I start to look for work,
Is the best time for us to drive
Down to Miami Beach."
And that's the family meeting.
We're leaving in three weeks.

Dazed, I stagger out into the yard.
Religious rays of sunlight seep
Through branches of a maple tree,
Falling on my face and at my feet.
What had been just for others
Is now also for *me*.

2.

Dad likes to leave early.
It's still dark that morning
When we pile our bags and selves
Into our new Dodge Coronet,
Fred across from me in back.

The night turns pink and purple
As we cross the Mississippi,
Passing tiny East Side towns
I've never heard of, like one
Whose sign says 'Entering St. Clair'".

3.

9 AM and we're in Cairo.
The Ohio meets the Mississippi
Right outside the window
Of the Wagon Wheel Café
Where we have breakfast.

Following the red line on our triptych,
I daydream of the unknown South,
Shaggy with Spanish moss.
We stop in Corinth, Mississippi,
As hordes of crickets chirr
Crescendos through the humid night.

4.

Bright morning comes, the two-lane road
Unrolled beside the Holiday Inn,
Every inch of it about to bring
New visions to my hungry eyes.

Thick kudzu lines the way
Through deep pine forests.
In some tiny, grey-board place
We stop for breakfast. Thick,
White goo adjoins our eggs.
"That stuff's called grits." #151
Dad's been around.
When I find a hair in mother's,
Though, we quietly file out.

Later, at a derelict filling station,
We stop to use the bathroom.
Our protector father goes in first
And comes back, grim-faced soon.
"We'll come back later! "
He tells the mystified attendant
As we pull away.

That afternoon in Dothan,
A town In southern Alabama,
I spy my first palmetto trees,
Growing in a front yard, in the ground.

By evening it's Ocala, Florida,
Far across the Suwanee.
A giant date palm rises
from the little traffic circle
Outside of our motel,

Its lush and massive fountain-fronds
A Temple for the screeching birds,
With hundreds roosting in its branches,
Feasting on the succulent, orange fruit.

5.

Next day we dive
Straight south some more.
Mid-afternoon, we finally reach
The causeway to Miami Beach.

Our goal in sight, some tensions
Smoldering between our parents
Burst into raging flame.
Dad's booked us at the Raleigh,
A modest, old hotel
Where his parents often stay.

But now mom spies
Across the Indian River,
Set there like an emerald,
The green and gleaming
<i>Fountainbleau</i>!

Exploding in self-pity,
She turns her rage on dad:
"I won't stay at that dump of yours! '
She looks at me and points
Across the water:
'You and I are going <i>there</i>! "

She grabs my hand
And pulls me from the car,
Then slams the door behind us.
I follow, trailing from her hand,
Devoured by her cloud of bile.
Sun blasts us without pity.

My brother stays behind with dad.
I look back, trying to unite
Our split-up family with my glance.

Why must it be like this?
Why must the 'other family' come out now?

Right before our mecca's gates,
My world and heart lie shattered
To see them cause each other pain.
But what can a young boy do?

6.

Later, we're all in our room
At the Raleigh. The storm,
Like many storms before, has passed.
Our "wholesome family" has returned.

I make acquaintance of the ocean,
Seduced by green and dancing
Palms heavy with coconuts.
We walk down Collins Avenue,
Papaya juice in hand.

We've finally entered heaven.

Max Reif

Poem From The 2nd Floor Balcony

Ah, we live
too close to the ground!

If we listened
really listened to the birds
they would tell us everything

and if we listened to the morning
breezes in the branches
we would know there is Ocean
invisible Ocean all around

and if we gazed long enough
perhaps the sky would tell us
that we are all inside a robin's egg
waiting to be born

Max Reif

Poem Of Listening

1.

I came to the place of listening,
Where I heard a terrible thunder
And rumblings of great chaos.

Frightened, I wanted to leave
But a soft voice said, 'Please don't.'

For a long time after that
My ear could discern only sobs
Till finally, Silence came.

2.

A mouth appeared in the darkness,
Crying, "I am the voice of the Heart! "
From the mouth came forth
A drop of sparkling light
That was also a golden note.

The drop became a world
Which began to unfold a Story.

3.

As I watched and listened, it led me
Down through history's chasm,
Back to the dawn of Creation.

I saw the first man, the first woman
Clothed in their naked love.
When they turned to show their faces,
I saw that each had my own face!
Reaching out their sinuous arms
They pulled me into themselves.
Then for eons, unreflecting,
I lived their pristine life.

4.

Suddenly, even First Forms
And Faces were stripped away.

I flowed as the rhythmic *bolero*
Of life from the very beginning,
The Music of the Soul,

A procession of colorful garments
Woven, re-woven from fibers
Of ones that had just been discarded,
Millions of melodies' garments
Of tumult and peace alternating,
All possible permutations.

At last, I re-dressed in my own threads.
The Night of Tales was over.
I returned to myself as I had been —
But clean as a new Creation.

Max Reif

Poemhunter Virginia Reel

Well, shashay down the Home Page line,
Swing your partner every time,
Firoze dance with Tara now,
Do-Si-Do with a poet-child

Hasan Ali Toqukin,
do-si-do with fannieson.
Michael Shepherd, promenade,
then go swing miss Macie Made.

Here comes Sherrie, here comes Ben,
up they come, then back again.
Scarlett does a kick and run,
Do-si-do with Allison.

Oh, we're off the main page already!
Write more poems, . Bill and Betty!

Max Reif

Poemhunter, Dropp In On Your Software, Fix The Bug!

Because my mother used to shout
"Dropp Dead! " at us when she got mad
And I don't want to make light of that pain,

Because I'm a mystic and I believe
We're all dropps in a Divine Ocean,

I beg, I implore you, Poemhunter,
Can't you dropp the bug on your software?

Say the whole dictionary is a box of chocolate
And every word is a single chocolate dropp:
Now I see how the flavor of *every* word
Must be right for the dictionary machine to work.

To use more metaphors, I never knew a word
Not even in the starting line-up of words
Could have such a profound effect
On the whole team—could dropp like a lead weight
Into a poem about a feather, but now I do.

We're sort of at your mercy here,
You're sort of the god-in-the-machine,
All a mortal like me can do is dropp this hint.

Max Reif

Poemhunters

Like beggars poring
through a Calcutta landfill
we peruse the Poems' column
looking for any glint of gold,
any contraption that works,
to carry off in our minds
while treasures buried
amid the sheer volume
go forever unrecognized
and the gulls of sarcasm
wheel screeching overhead,
ready to pounce.

Max Reif

Poetic Journal,2/11/07

AFTER THE RAIN

Under this wonderful sky,
is it not self-evident
our life is a great Adventure?
Are not all destinations
obviously holy?

Losing the great vision on a weekday,
as everyone tunnels to business like ants
and Business tries to throw its obsessive
net over the rushing traffic —

as long as this vast dome
of our infinity remains above us,
how can we go wrong?
How can even our fumbling
fail to get us
someplace beautiful?

**

OUTSIDE/INSIDE

The clock face is so simple,
the hands going round.
But a look inside
and we'd be lost amid gears.

The aisles of the store
present an appealing display.
Inside the office, the boss
struggles to balance
the nightmare accounts.

The downtown street is lovely,
yet restaurants and shops
are always dying and being born,
just like the people walking down the sidewalks.

I open my eyes.
The sun is shining
on the eternal traffic going by.
Inside, images, shadows.
No clear sense
of where I'm going,
or why.

**

AH!

We haven't seen the sun
for so many days, I'd forgotten
what these clear skies,
this blazing, feel like.

I'd gotten used to
mercifully opaque heavens

and falling asleep
to the drops from the gutter
coming down
one at a time
in syncopation
with the general
patter on the pavement.

This transparency,
that curtain:
two sides
of the same joy.

**

PERSONAL HISTORY

Reading the principles
of a spiritual life,
he feels the perfection
and the truth of the words:

<i> The world is a great Illusion,
Atma is Paramatma,

only God is real.</i>

The Peace he feels
blankets the universe.
Swans glide
upon the lake of his mind:

<i>Things that are real
are given and received
in Silence.

Live in the Present,
which is ever-beautiful... '

'in the world
but not of the world...' </i>

And as he walks out his door,
a Sacred Name is rolling
like a wheel in his consciousness,
'mosquito net' against danger.

But as he assumes
his daily duties, the boat
of his idealism
begins to take on water,
and after awhile,
still repeating the Name,
he sinks, meditating
all the while

on the great abyss
between theory and practice.

Max Reif

Polar Bear Dream

We're letting a polar bear
sleep at our house,
on a cot
on the front
porch.

He takes off his bear skin
and puts on
a tank top I left him,
and some binoculars
around his neck.
He looks just like
a person now.

After awhile, I ask him
to put his bear suit back on,
but somehow we've messed it up —
the edges are all ragged.

I take him inside
and tell him,
'Well, we'll just
turn the refrigerator on,
and there's another suit
almost as good, '

but I don't like the idea
of a polar bear
being caged.

Max Reif

Prayer

Amid the flickering
shadows of the world,
the tapestry that has
no substance, but is
wholly sleight-of-hand,
except for Love,
let me know
and live for Love
and dwell in the
unchanging depths,
from where the transient
play of waves
is beautiful.

Max Reif

Prayer 2

God Help our world

whose forests are falling under the axe,

whose air is slowly warming and

whose oceans are rising,

whose mineral deposits are running low,

whose highways are slow with traffic,

whose cities reap a daily harvest of smoke,

whose animal species are disappearing,

whose indigenous cultures are being decimated by Rambo videos and Nintendo,

whose weak are preyed upon in a thousand different locales,

whose people die in exploding cars,

whose sons and daughters wander homeless,

whose gates new souls enter every day

from other realms with clear, radiant eyes,

may the saviours of humanity be among them.

Max Reif

Preface To A Long Poem About Death

I used to believe we're born once and die.
I was pretty young then and didn't know what death was—
Maybe bullets from a machine gun on a TV show,
Which I thought I could put my hands out to stop.

Our Rabbi never spoke of death
Except in the Friday services
When the organ would play background music
And a hush blanketed the congregation
At the word 'Yisgadol', which began Kaddush.

Christians sometimes ranted about death and Judgment,
But that was a parallel world, I was a reform Jew,
One of the ones who wore a red cape for Christmas carols
But never sang on the word 'Christ'.

We believed the Russians would come one night
In their planes, dropp bombs and kill us all,
I asked my dad and he said yeah, it would happen.
What I worried about, though, was not death
But the possibility I'd be on the toilet
When the sirens went off, and my family
Would already have left town by the Emergency Route.

Max Reif

Proposal To Outlaw The Word 'Love' In Poems (A Mean Poem?)

'Love loves to love love.'

-James Joyce

I believe in Love,
But the word 'love',
When it occurs in a poem

Is often a blanket
Thrown over the real
Interaction being described.

If I were dictator
I might decree
No love-poet could use
The word 'love'.

Max Reif

Randall Jarrell

This poet who could write
with voice of child, drawn
from eyes whose spark
had never dimmed

walked into traffic at 51
to meet a solid, metal fate,

but the words of the wonderchild
still live in the books on library shelves,
need only a reader's
glance to ignite,
and what I want to know is

why fate had to be so solid
as it barrelled its way
to lay him low?

Max Reif

Random Foursome

Just a little while ago,
that bald African-American
who's sitting at the window booth,

that young, unshaven fellow
with the earring and the cap,

that silver-haired Caucasian
daydreaming in his polo shirt

and I, were congregated,
quite by chance
around the coke machine.

'How 'bout a game of golf? '
I could have said,
though of course, they would
have thought me mad.

What are the odds the four of us
will ever meet up anywhere again?

Life keeps mixing us around
much more than we realize —
atoms in perpetual flux,
marbles in a divine game.

Max Reif

Reader To Poet

With a string of woven words
You invite me to follow you
Where are you leading me?

Do you believe the rope is strong
Just because it's of your making?
Pride can inflate a maker's view.

I need an artifice I can hold onto!
I want to feel *secure*
When I give myself to you. And,

I want to *go* somewhere,
Not just be left in mud.
Suspend me over chasms;
Take me to the stars!
Gift me with thoughts
I'd never have
And dreams my mind
Could not create!

Poet, I'm trusting you.
I'm hanging from a lifeline
You have crafted. Learn

To take your dreams
And weave them
Of a secret stuff
So strong, so full,
That I can join you there.

Max Reif

Recent History

I was writing a poem a day,
sometimes two. It constituted
evidence that I was alive.

For some people,
mere breathing
does not do that.
Even 'I think...' is not enough.
Their credo's 'I create,
therefore I am.'

I was daily proving
my existence to myself
with a poem, but
I did not *feel* alive
most of the rest of the time.

And so I began to dive
in search of an 'I Am'
to rest in. I sought the flow
from which the world was born.
My pen dropped
into its pool of Silence.
I haven't found it yet.

Max Reif

Reflection Of A Middle-Aged Man

The sledge-hammer came down very early,
and I was shanghied into life.

I wake up at 58, thinking
'but I thought I was 21! '

But there's no *time* to think!
Today's screaming to be lived,
the vast machinery of Creation
has already begun its grinding.

Max Reif

Remembering Dad At The Lawyer's

1. The Wrongful Death

I'm at the Hobart Law Firm
In downtown St. Louis.
Mom's in the room
With the closed door,
Giving a deposition
In her lawsuit
On dad's 'wrongful death'.

Dad's death
Was slightly ironic.
Grossly overweight,
He loved to eat
And hated exercise.
Mom insisted that he go
To the Rehab Exercise Center —
She was the kind of person
Who wouldn't accept a no.

One afternoon, walking his laps,
He tripped over one of those
Portable electrical outlets,
That they'd left unmarked
In the middle of the floor.

His fall left his whole body
Black and blue. A day later at home,
He suffered a heart attack.
In the hospital, his doctors
Did an angioplasty,
From which he never recovered.

2. At the Hospital

The night I arrived
At the hospital, he seemed ok
Except that he talked too fast,
Believed my wife had moved to Seattle,

And tried to get dressed to go to work
Every twenty minutes or so.

Next morning, though,
His doctor told us
He'd need a respirator to survive,
And even that wouldn't guarantee anything.

My brother burst into tears.
Three months before,
He'd lost his youngest daughter.
He'd let them place her
On a respirator, just before the end.
Now he felt he'd subjected her
To unnecessary indignities,
And refused to see it happen again.
Mom and I immediately concurred.

The hospital withdrew
From dad's feeding tubes
Certain antibiotics
That were keeping him alive.
A couple hours later
He began to fade.

We sang together
As I stroked
His bald head and forehead
With a wet washcloth.

The cantor from Temple
Came in and joined us.
The three of us sang Louis Armstrong's
'What a Wonderful World'.
Soon after, dad sank into sleep.
The cantor's solemn bass began
Some Hebrew hymn
Whose meaning I quickly divined as
'Welcome to Heaven'.

A few hours after that,
The line on the monitor went flat

While 'Gone With The Wind'
Played on the radio in the room —
Fitting for a man who'd gone to Hollywood
To be an actor in the '30s and still loved movies.

Mom threw her arms around Dad,
The first time I ever remember
Seeing her embrace him.

He didn't look any different, but his spirit
Had slipped away like a thief.

3. Our Relationship

In truth, his spirit
Had slipped away from me
When I was 8 or 9.
That was when 'Daddy' became 'Father'.
That was when he'd greeted my kiss one day
With 'Men don't kiss, men shake hands.'

Till that day,
His arms had always been
Safe harbor of my life,
Always open for my little boat
To return there, happy.

I write this at 57.
I never really got him back.
The eternal drama of father and son,
Tension of the messy truth
Of two separate individualities
Who are more than a mold and its copy,
Slowly began to unfold after that early
Withdrawal of his affections,
And a truce, anxious or friendly by turns,
Was the best we were
Able to do after that.

4. Making Peace

And so on that night

Walking into his room,
I felt a burden.
Packing my bags
Back home in California,
I'd felt the concern of every son:
'Do we have unfinished business?
What if this is it? '

He'd long been a kite
All but out of sight
In the skies of my world,
Though my finger
Still held onto a string.

Tiptoeing into the room,
I saw him in the bed, eyes closed.
As careful as I was, he heard my feet.
Opening his eyes, he shouted with an almost
Absurd glee, 'Maxie's here! Now I can die! '

Mother and Fred and Ann came in
A little later, and then they left again.
Alone with him, I brought the question:
"Anything you want to say to me, dad? '
And prepared for whatever he might reply.

'I'm very proud of you! ' said the benign
Voice of this man who'd long berated
What he'd called my hippie philosophy,
Quoting for decades after
An offhand remark I'd made back in '68
About not 'believing in work''.

'I'm glad you're working at the school, '
Dad continued. 'Education's a wonderful field.
Now if you can just
Do something with your writing,
You'll have everything you want.'

I listened, stunned
At his oracular words,
My burden dissolving as he spoke.

Next day he died.

4. A Hymn and Meditation on His Demise

We let him go,
We let him float away,
the kite of his spirit
Left the moorings of his body,
Let go of the string from the other end.
Gathered by his bed,
We saw a little later he was gone.

Of course, we never told him,
'We're taking you off
Your antibiotics now,
You'll go to sleep
And wake up in another world.'

His death was so peaceful —
Was it fair to him?
Rilke wrote of a baron
Who died on his estate.
Every night for weeks before,
He wailed and screamed all night
Doing fierce battle with Death
As his servants quaked downstairs.
Since he was lord of his estate,
He did just as he pleased.
A powerful death, un-anesthetized,
As it should be, the poet wrote.

Sometimes I wonder, Dad,
Whether you even
Know you're dead today,
Or if your kite's
Still hovering somewhere
Just beyond our atmosphere?

5. His Pain

The pain of my father's life
Is more than I will tell you,

At least while Mother is alive.

I wonder about writers
Who leave trauma
In the wake of their words.
Society looks on Steinbeck
As a hero, while I'm not sure
He had a friend
Left in Salinas.

'Truth is not truth
If it hurts another's heart, '
A great man has said.

Yet sometimes
One must speak out,
Or India would still be British,
We'd still have WHITE and COLORED
Drinking fountains.

I'm glad that Gandhi
Spoke his truth,
But I'm not ready
To tell you certain things
I've realized
About my dad.

And will I ever
Really know that truth?
Some things <i>seem</i> true
From my perspective.
But can I really wrap my hands
All the way around the truth?

Perhaps blunt truth is the only club
Strong enough to trample
Some falsehoods In its wake

Dad seemed a sad man,
So I thought.
He tried to make

The best of disappointments.

But there was more
To him than I can know.
I've met young men he knew from work
To whom he was a mentor, a father figure.
I saw the respect for him
That showed upon their faces.

5. Coda:

Now Mother's coming out.
The opposition lawyers
Have all left. The
Deposition's done.

I found a nice place
We can go for lunch.
It won't bring Dad back here,
Or make their marriage
Perfect, retroactively,
And I don't know
If in God's Book
There's such a thing
As 'wrongful death'.

But though the family didn't
Even cremate him
The way he wished
(he just said to do that
'cause he's cheap,
My mother said) ,

He told her
'Sue the sons of bitches'
As he lay there on the floor.

And in this,
She's being true.

Max Reif

Reminder

Yesterday in a letter
I playfully scolded
an old friend,

then vainly searched
his reply this morning
for a sign of wit

or even friendship.
Remind me to be careful
approaching old friends,

or anyone—we never know
what grief a soul may be nursing
beneath a shell of frozen smiles.

Max Reif

Responding To Wendell Berry

I read a poet
who farms the land,
the land he grew up on.

He'd gone off to the city,
taught in the university,
then became inspired
to go back home.

His colleagues tried
to talk him out of it.
'Think of your career, ' they said, but
he would not be dissuaded.

That was long ago.
He's happy with his choice.
His feet are on the ground, and words
come deeply rooted from his pen.

But I, born in the city's entrails,
all Fire and Air
with no Earth in my chart,

read his work and wonder,
'Do I need to be a farmer, too? '
troubled by the question:
if I'm only building castles in the sky,
what good am I doing?

And then, I *felt* a new poem,
just like dreaming —
unusual for me —

asleep, I am a fallow field,
and when I rise,
a green and dancing field of corn.
I open my arms and give
my golden Life to the hungry,
and then lay down

again in the dreaming Earth</i>

and I wonder,
was this poem my Answer?

Max Reif

Ritual Of Cleansing

It's easy on a Sunday morning,
setting out on the freeway to do the shopping
while the air is still cool and the sky a shockingly
harmonious blue and the hammer
of Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday
is resting from the Hand that wields it,

to talk to God and say 'Now is all,
this moment is all, there is, '
and with that one brief sentence
dissolve in a vast Ocean
a whole lifetime of disappointments
and partly-realized efforts, and feel all of life
come up refreshed and clean,

and there's every reason to believe
in an infinite possibility—after all, the sun
is still young and climbing, why not us?

On the way home a few hours later
a lot more two-armed, two-legged
versions of the human condition
are in evidence everywhere and I'm fatigued.
Doing anything has become a bit of a struggle
and I just want to get home.

I try the cleansing a second time.
The results are not as dramatic,
but still, if it worked last time,
the world is only a couple hours old now,
and next Sunday I'll start out early again.

Max Reif

Rules For A Marriage

Look, I'm quite happy
As an introverted, sloppy,
Creative, easygoing, poor,
Overweight, insecure misfit!

I don't need your anal,
Obsessive, ultra-organized,
Critical nitpicking!

I like it in my little hole.
Except that I need you
To come when I call you
And comfort me,
Relieve my loneliness,
Laugh at my jokes,
Share a little affection.

But watch it!
Don't say the wrong thing
Or suggest my world
Is anything but perfect.

There may be a candy wrapper
On the floor. You're not allowed
To say it. Even if you trip
Over that anvil while walking
Over to kiss me, not a word!
And if it doesn't smell so good in here
To you with your supersonic nose,
This is *my* hole, I'll do what I want
With my time and my space!

Observe these few little rules
And we'll get along just fine!

Max Reif

Saturday

This morning there is no place
waiting for me except where my feet take me
or where my car seems to go of its own accord.

I notice iris stalks in the cold air
beside the gas station driveway
and lemons in a small tree across the street.

None of them have any plans for me
or anything to say, and that is fine because
things real are given in silence, and the silence

of this morning is a great blue bowl
filled with earth and sky,
and the silence of the lemons and iris stalks
is one of mutual respect
of pure being in all of us.

Pine trees in the distance
wear luxurious fir coats,
the mountains' far outline is jagged and wild,

and there is everywhere to go
and nowhere

Max Reif

Saturday Night Rituals

The paper boy brought Sunday's <u>Post</u> on Saturday night
as our family watched "The Hit Parade" inside.
We'd hear his cart rattling by on the icy pavement,
then his song, in his nasal voice: "Baaay-berrr! "

Dad would give me two shiny quarters.
Opening the front door, I'd see him there,
small shadow in the streetlight's wide corona.
Slipping and sliding out into the middle
of the deserted intersection, I'd make the exchange:
warm coins for the thick, cold sheaf of paper
folded with Blondie and Dagwood right on top.

Our house came alive with our colorful visitor's entry,
its newsprint-ink perfume filling the den
as it started to share tales of the world outside.
Dad gave away the colors, distributing sections.
I waited for the funnies and PARADE.

But excitement did not last long.
In truth, our visitor had not much to tell us.
Its bright folds were filled with empty promise,
its rainbow colors enhanced commercial phantoms.

Soon it lay on the sofa like a discarded lover.
Ourselves again, we began the next family ritual:
turning off lights and getting ready for bed.

Max Reif

Seeing Griffy Run

Seeing Griffy run to mom
or heel-toe, to my banjo tune,
his splaying dance of toddler-hood,
a total pleasure on his face,
brings back all joy I've ever known.

His every move is still his own,
created from the music
or a distance to be covered.
He'll find the world's
rhythms soon enough.

Olympic athletes,
New York ballerinas
might feel envy,
if they cannot share the joy
of seeing Griffy run and dance.

Max Reif

Self-Identification By Process Of Elimination

I don't know how to make things
out of metal or stone
or bring them forth from the ground,

or how a building rises
like magic from Nothing, or how

raw metal, plastic and rubber
arrive at a plant
and come off a conveyor
sleek, shiny and ready to drive,

can't follow out
the lines of fate
on circuit boards

or create a machine
that makes other machines,

don't know what tool and dye is
or for that matter, escrow.

What I know is how
to walk around outdoors
and appreciate the Magic
of some of those things
and the gifts Nature bestows.

I'm an eye
and sometimes an ear,
and when clouds
aren't in the way,
a beating heart —

all Air and Fire,
swimming
through Water
toward Earth,
which I love.

Max Reif

Something Beautiful

Something beautiful
You gave me,
Alive and
Needing care,

And though I tried
To nurture it,
It wound up
Dead and bare.

Something in me
Strangled it,
Crushed its frail
Life out,

And having sought
To love it
I felt shame
And guilt
And doubt.

You gave me then
Another gift,
Beautiful and fresh.
Again I snuffed its spirit out.
Again I brought it death,

For something in me murderous
Upon it took its toll
As I tried to nourish it
With all my heart and soul.

And now I stand
Beside my life

Of painful memories.
Don't let this happen
Any more. Oh, don't
Allow it, please!

Send me to the Grower's School,
To learn to nurture free
The precious gifts You send my way —
To let them grow and be,

To join them in a love song
Ever beautiful and new,
Full of joyous spirit
Of gratitude to You.

Max Reif

Song

When human beings lift a voice in song,
bowl movements, and quarrels somehow disappear.

These people at the Christian Conference at our hotel —
at breakfast in the cafe' this morning
I wondered which of the diners here are *them*,

and then I saw the telltale proof, the squat
black objects there, beside some at their tables,
and fleetingly imagined some might be
as hidebound as those thick black tomes.

But when I passed the closed door of the room
where they had just begun their Sunday service,
I heard one voice composed of many voices
soaring upon the unlimited spiritual sky,
the blissful, disembodied, voice of angels,
voice of neighbor, brother, friend and wife,
and knew the voice that waits within all voices —
the world that trembles, waiting to be born.

Max Reif

Spirit Freed From Wood

In the same front yard that used to have
one of those whimsical, wooden,
painted cut-outs stuck in the ground
of a lady seen from behind
as she bends over in her garden,

Max Reif

Spring, Mutability

This is the place
Where only last week
All barriers were down—
Heaven surged
Directly into Creation,
Laying bare
God's every secret.

Here beside this hill
Hundreds of pink
Ballet-dancers
Stood poised upon
These branches,
Pirouetting and leaping
In the breeze-

Or was it a single bride
With dancers embroidered
On her gown—

A bride embraced
By that lover
Right over there
Sporting his new,
Gold suit, the color
Of First Light?

Already the dancers
are gone from the branches
And the leaves remaining
Resemble only ash,

While the nearby lover
Has changed into
His work suit of drab,
Midsummer-green.

My eyes strain
To find where

That Opening was,

Incredulous that Nature
Can so quickly divest
Her bride and groom,
Leaving no memento
Of their recent glory.

Max Reif

Stories

And where does a story end,
and another one begin?
And what of those moments,
lounging on a street corner
watching the traffic go by?
Aren't they part
of a story, too?

The threads of the tapestry
weave a single pattern, yet
we hunger for a discreet
beginning and end, not God's
Coltrane-like music of being
everyone everywhere
at once and for all time,

a story following a thread,
'a piece of string' like de Maupassant's,
a beginning, middle and end,
a glimpse, something
for those of us walking
a path on earth and preparing
to take a next step,
maybe lifting our heads
to some vista far beyond

Max Reif

Strange Positionings

Years ago she broke up with me.
I wanted to be a hero and get her back,
even though she was hot
for our bearded, beatnik best friend
and I cruised by her place one night
to find the two of them getting out of her car,
and knew they were going upstairs to bed.

That was like a cup of acid on my heart.
A day or so later, I refused
to leave after a party a friend of hers had,
so that he'd call the cops
and they'd put me in jail.

The plain-clothesman who came told me,
'Look, we need to use our time
to find real criminals. You need to stop this
or I'll plant drugs on you
and send you up for 25 years! '

I stopped. Went to the country
to ease the pressure,
kept drifting West,
wound up living on the Coast.

I saw her a few times on visits back.
After a year or two, our bearded friend beat her up.
Since then she'd been mostly alone.
She kept putting on weight,
her thoughts were getting stranger
and stranger, remnants of '60s anger.
You could tell she didn't bathe much.
She lived in books, almost never went out.

Today I feel ashamed to call or be seen with her,
this person I once was willing to go to jail for.
The thought of her brings out some filth in me,
and I'd better start cleaning it,
or I may see scales tilting yet again!

I

Max Reif

Sufi Banjo Tunes (After Hafiz)

These little sufi
banjo tunes alive
are what it takes
to waken my heart.

What is that to *you*,
unless the life
in that plinking
of these little ditties

roils the dead, ordered
calm in your heart
and sets waves rolling
that threaten your control?

*But why not just
join in and dance?*

Max Reif

Sunday After Brunch (A Sonnet)

Exiting the glass-and-steel hotel
Where Mom had just regaled us with a brunch
As newlyweds, so we'd be toasted well,
I felt my *raincoat* whispering a hunch.

That stylish wrap between the world and me
Said *"Look out at this slate-grey, drizzly day."*
So, fumbling for our borrowed Jaguar's key,
I gazed out toward the park across the way.

Suddenly, for a moment then, time froze,
Soul bridging body, coat, car, buildings, rain
In absolute perfection and repose.
Then I walked on, and time began again.

I met you at the car, and you described
The selfsame vision *you* had just imbibed.

Max Reif

Tangential Logic

Comin' out of Trader Joe's today,
I saw a guy sitting
at a little stand out front.
'Free newspaper?' he asked.
'OK,' I said,
'I got a real good deal
on home delivery,'
he started to go on.
'I read the news on my
computer,' I said apologetically.
'You can't wrap fish in *that*!' he said,
and I guess he had a point.

Max Reif

Taste Of Freedom

Today the little bird
is let out of his cage.
He doesn't know
if his wings will still fly,
but at least he can enjoy
walking around
the garden-like world.

The bird dreams;
in his cage,
even his dreams
often have bars,

but as he strolls in the garden,
he feels like a peacock,
suns and stars and luminous eyes
blazing from his own tail.

Whether he flies or not
is almost immaterial,
for his world today
is cool and green,
and that is Heaven.

Where else
would he wish to soar?

Max Reif

Teacher

I thought I was alone
On the farm, the one
Where we had our commune
So long ago, and where
I'd finally broken down,
Till I just sat, day after day
In the livingroom closet
Or out in the milk room
Of the old barn.

But when you appear
And ask if I'll work for you,
I say I will. You look trustworthy
In your red flannel shirt
With your greased black hair
And 40 year-old's good looks.

You demonstrate
How to do the jobs
By starting them yourself,
Then letting me take over.

Buckling yourself in
To a newly painted
Yellow-gold chairlift,
You paint in what would be
An awkward position otherwise,
Part-way up the barn wall
Above a length of unused
Three-foot concrete pipeline.

Next, using a sort of power-drill,
You grind away caked oil and dirt
From a big fixture
Of metal shelves of tools.

I take over each job
As soon as you show me how,
And I'm able to do them

Just as smoothly as you.

Seeing myself in action,
I'm becoming *thrilled*
To realize I'm not stupid
The way my father
Used to say I was
Every time we moved
Furniture together
For his business,
When I was a child.

I can do anything
I'm patiently shown!

My Teacher,
You're giving me the power,
You're giving me the tools

To free myself
From the caked,
Grimy shelves
Of my own past.

Max Reif

Teaching A Seven-Year-Old To Play Guitar

This week he's hiding
under a blanket
when I come.

I ask him, 'Do you <i>want</i>
to have your lesson? '
He tells me 'Yes', and so
we go into the next room,
to his music stand, and start.

I watch his little fingers
make the chords,
trying to gain a hand-hold
over chaos.

His memory's impressive,
though he sometimes
muffles every string
and has no sense
of when to strum.

I think of what it is
I want to teach him,
the things that seem
so simple, now, for me.

These concepts,
time and rhythm,
this finesse of fingers
don't come naturally.

They must be dredged
out of a dark sea
with a net of patience.

Sometimes he walks away
before the lesson's done,
telling me he's tired,

and I leave feeling our effort's dead.
Next week, perhaps, his mom will say,
'We're going to take a break...'

I struggle through despair
those few moments weekly
I can spare for preparation,
drawing rhythm charts:

two long lines
mark off a measure,
a short line for every strum,
chords and lyrics penciled in.

This week, it works!
Clapping out the 4/4,
then the 3/4 time,
I finally *hear* the songs
he's worked so long on.

He doesn't, but he will.
Life has come from the dead
impasse. The air in my lungs
is vast and fresh now,
like the sky that greets me
when I get outside.

I feel as though I've tutored Alexander
for his conquest of the world.

Max Reif

Thanks To The Elders, After Initiation

You wait, always wait,
equally places and states
of mind:

mountain-top, your
snow solitude call
drifts unbearably down
to my suburban burden,

and you,
o hidden highway
every lane leads to
should we choose
to follow,

you wait,
and when I
am done forgetting

I will come,
I will come again

Max Reif

The Alchemist

Each morning long before dawn,
I rise and creep downstairs,
an alchemist entering his study.

I turn on my magic screen
to see what gifts
the darkness has bestowed.

Again today, few results
of the work are manifest.

Disappointment rises.
Perseverance
gets up to comfort her,

and the work goes on.

Max Reif

The Best Things

The best things
have their day

and then a night
of muffled struggle,

until some tiny
movement of the heart

brings back their
eternal clarity

Max Reif

'The Big One'

The hurricane hit in 1969,
no matter that it came from inside me.
It was the Big One, a raging fury
that uprooted all pilings, divested me
of moorings and infrastructure,
left me reaching up
from a broken roof of desperation
on a dark night without shelter,
left nothing to start again with
but a seed, very deep within.

I wrote a poem years later that began,
"none can imagine
the ocean of suffering
some minds are drowning in,
as none can imagine
the sea of joy
some other minds have found."

Today I watch the people in New Orleans
bereft, clinging to their rooftops,
huddling in a flooding stadium.
I can't feel how hot it is there,
or what it's like when the toilets
and water taps don't work,
there's no food,
a stinking river is rising,
and you don't know where your wife is.
TV offers a hint of the devastation,
imagination refuses to flesh out the rest.

The seed of my own new life,
after Shiva* finished off the old,
has flourished. I'm a man
with a profession, a wife and a house—
thirty-five years spent to attain
some balance and try to keep
the flame of inner life alive.

I don't understand the ways of God.
It could all be gone again tomorrow.
If that happened—and I were fully aware—
I should prostrate on the ground and thank Him.

*Shiva—the Hindu god of Destruction, part of the trinity that also includes
Brahma (Creation) and Vishnu (Preservation) . Destruction=
the beginning of a new cycle of creation.

Max Reif

The Blank Page And The Poet's Mission

The blank sheet of paper
is always a new beginning,
a chance to create the world again,

repudiate memory,
right all wrongs,

dethrone Intellect
and dunk him three times
in the Lake of the Heart
till he laughs,

write the world
the way you know it ought to be
so that when you lift
your pen and your face,
it really *will* be different,
and even

create a Golden Scripture
that will transform
everyone who sees it
and put us finally
all on the same page
forever.

And the amazing thing is
that you actually *attain*
all that sometimes,
and you know when you've done it,
it's not just some kind of delusion,

it's a genuine
change of the metaphysical
and molecular state of everything.

But then cooling or something
begins to set in,
it's not the same as it was,

and you realize
you're gonna have to do it again.

Max Reif

The Chair

A chair sits
In a Waiting Room.
The chair, too, waits,
To embrace a new sitter,
Offering itself in perfect surrender,
Completely free of judgment.

I can learn from the chair's
Model of perfect service,

But no artisan except Time,
Who makes and destroys worlds
Within a blink of God's Eternal Eye,
Can structure the framework
And upholster the cushions
Of kindness into
My mind and heart.

(2004)

Max Reif

The City Of God

In the City of God
All roads lead to God,
Each instant a crossroads
Of divine possibility.

At the Plaza of the Eternal Present,
The Avenue of Memory
Flows mystically into
The Boulevard of Things to Come.

Everywhere, Platonic Forms
Go by in search of bread
Or omnipotence.

The City is a perfect Mandala.
Its radiant pathways
Channel divine
Activity every direction.

We stopped erecting shrines
The day we recognized
The City *is* a shrine.

Max Reif

The Country Of My Body

The country of my body
has narrow boundaries.
Here in this small place,
Fate has allotted my task:

to work the fields of joy and sorrow,
harvest the fruits of my actions,
and contemplate their sweet
and bitter residues.

Max Reif

The Coward

He was never able to risk rejection.
His hand would freeze
dialing a girl's phone number.
Traffic of nerves jammed all intersections.
Even an emergency vehicle carrying him
to receive necessary Oxygen of Fresh Life
could not get through anxiety's clogged highways.
Everything seemed to take a detour
back to that room, that day, with mother.

And now that it was all long done,
now that he could even look back
on efforts spun out over adult decades,
he still threw up his hands.
Effort had never been able to break that deadlock.
It was like a fairy tale in which, when the hero
gets stronger, the monster does, too.

Yes, the things he'd shrunk from reaching out for
had finally come to him, in other ways.
There was magic in that, too.
Still, he wondered, sometimes,
if it was really the same.

Max Reif

The Day After Thanksgiving

1.

Dwayne and Bonnie and the kids
went kayaking down in Laguna Beach.
The rest of us went 'deli-surfing'—
wound up sitting around
yet another table,
eating and talking.
I said to my wife,
'Aren't you sick of food?
Why don't we open a place
full of tables and chairs,
and advertise,
'SIT AROUND A TABLE AND TALK.'
No food, no drink, no nothing.'
'I don't think anyone would come, ' she said.

2.

Went for a night walk
up on Naples Island,
a neighborhood of show houses
built around canals
right by the ocean,
known for its Christmas lights.

As mom and Barbara and I
walked along in a drizzle,
a gondola glided up behind us
like a black shadow.

A woman stood steering
with a pole in each hand.
Five or six people sat —
tourists, no doubt.

'Can you sing 'O Solo Mio'?'
I called from our elevated walkway.
'I don't know that one. Something else? '
'Anything.'

A aria

began to rise
across the misty waters
the gondola was plying.
The world drowned in archetypes.
Even the rain seemed
to hold back, listening.

The boat sailed slowly past,
disappearing under a bridge.
Only the voice remained,
then silence.

Max Reif

The Death Of The Familiar

I waited for each
protracted day to stretch by
before leaving on my trip,

living through every
crucified minute,
no other way, and then,

as the day neared,
I began to *fear* this new life,
this release from routine
into the abundance of a heart's
dream about to be brought alive.

Anything new
entails a little death,
I realized, any departure
beyond known rounds brings

some frantic grasping for the life
you're *choosing* to end,
its solid body
that you'll never touch again

Max Reif

The Difference Between Journalism And Literature

Who what where why when,
the 5 'ws', the lead of the story
are supposed to tell the reader,
I'd learned in this journalism school,

but I'm stuck on the first 'w',
haven't even gotten to the story.

Who am I? Doesn't the writer
need to answer that question
before he can write the news?

Before I put down the first word,
a thousand speculations
cross the surface of my mind,
and the pencil never moves.

I sit at my desk asking myself,
who is writing this?

I try to go back
and remember: let's see,
I was born after World War II.

A cloud of advertising
brought our country
forgetfulness in the '50s.
Not so long before that,
the Industrial Revolution
alienated labor.

The world, in which
all these dramas were enacted
arose out of cosmic dust,
which itself came
out of a big explosion...

'Turn in your papers.
Class is dismissed, '

I heard the professor say.

My pencil hadn't written a word.

Max Reif

The Ethics Of Lunch

Pulling apart the plastic package
that enclosed the turkey slices,
I tore off a few for my lunch
and returned the rest to the package,
placing it back in the box
that also contained
one of steak slices
and another of ham.

I thought of the millions
of animals who die for us each day,
then of the films I recently saw
showing a big, placid cow
getting stunned by a mechanical bludgeon
and rolled onto a conveyor belt
for butchering. I thought

of all that is hidden as I peel open
my neat, little bag of sliced food,
and wondered, carrying the plastic box
back to the fridge, what I would do

if it was *people* —
say, the lowest classes of society,
judged expendable and bred
for this purpose — whose sliced
flesh wound up in my deli drawer?

Would I do more than stop
and think about it for a moment,
as though about some abstract question,

before going on with my day?

(.....10sept)

Max Reif

The Fall Of Language

Oh, words,
you were empty vessels
grazing on virgin hillsides,
transparent to the sun.

Conscripted and sentenced
to forced marches,
charging into no-man's land,

you forgot who you were.
Repent, words. Remember.
Purify yourselves.

Find those white wings.
Fly up and out
a chimney in the heart,

on a dark night
when no one sees.

Max Reif

The Fountain

In the plaza
I hear the fountain splashing.
In the courtyard
of the plaza
at Todos Santos Park,

I am witness
to the fountain of the soul,
endlessly up-surg-ing,
endlessly creative,
endlessly effervescent.

A fountain inside me
reaches out and shouts
'Brother! ',

for it too
is nestled
as if in a green,
tree-shaded plaza,

in a courtyard
with arched columns
and glazed, ceramic vases,

it too
forever brings
a fresh flow
that cascades
out and down,

and sometimes
I forget.

Max Reif

The Gift

I began unravelling
The ribbons
On Your Gift

Firmly believing
I knew
Who I was.

By the time
Unwrapping
Was complete

The whole Universe
Had become the Present

And there was no one
To receive it.

Max Reif

The Grounds Crew, Summer Of '76 (Revised)

1,

Johnny Jackson trimmed the bush
with the new weed-whacker,
then said with satisfaction, 'Finished! '
I turned around and saw
there was nothing left of the bush.

Johnny had just
returned from Vietnam,
and I cringed to think
what he might have done *there*.

2.

'These people live like pigs! '
the white guys would say
cleaning out a black tenant's
abandoned apartment.

We'd always drive the truck
to places just vacated,
to clean them
and look for loot.

The whole crew would congregate,
with treasure in mind. I got to keep
some Cat Stevens records once,
not a coin valued in that realm,

but when we came upon some object
or appliance of general interest,
you could see the covetous gleam
appear in every eye. Not immune,

I'd start thinking of
'The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.'

3.

At age 28, I was a guy
picking up paper with one of those

sticks that has a nail on the end.
My partner and I
posed for our photo
I still have—
'swords crossed'—
no worldly ambition at all.

4.

My dad was the Manager
of the 1900-unit complex.
It was *his* job to worry
for a big New York company.

A salesman came by once
with a large machine he said
would end our lawn problems forever.

'By God, let's *do* it! '
said Dad, red-faced and earnest,
impulsively spending
thousands in a second.

We all knew nothing anyone did
would make a difference.
No one cared enough.

5.

My partner and I would stop
and talk to girls. One of them
invited us to a party
at her place one night.
Finding it too noisy there,
I tried to leave in half an hour,
but she seemed to take my attempt
as some kind of personal affront,
and I went back to 'mingling'.

Half hour later, I tried again.
This time, she accepted
my 'good night' graciously.
My visit had now crossed
some secret threshold

of demonstrated respect,
known only to her.

Max Reif

The Hawk

The hawk glides
above the massive hill,
alone but not lonely,
small shepherd of the great sky,

moving razor of divide,
bold will expressed
in perfect passivity
as it rides currents —

a wing
and an eye

Max Reif

The History Of Europe, In And Out

Napoleon Bonaparte,
marching out with all his troops,
could not succeed at
conquering the world,

which centuries before
St. John of the Cross had done
while imprisoned in a closet
by conquering himself.

Max Reif

The Image Of Perfection (Sonnet)

A day of balmy, vast, blue, cloudless sky,
and I, a traveler, sitting in my car,
survey the world stretched out before my eye
with time to journey to where wishes are,

the power harnessed underneath my foot,
the highways winding anywhere I choose
to claim a dream, no matter how remote,
that springs forth from Imagination's muse.

What destination's worthy of my journey?
What object's worth the effort of my quest?
Through what ideal embodiment of beauty
might I find satisfaction, and then rest?

Do such things live at all in time and space,
or reflect from some deep, interior place?

Max Reif

The Inner Voice (1)

'You're completely covered with Wings, but
you can't even fly a foot! ' said the Voice
as I woke from my nap that evening.

No one else was in the room.
Had I heard the voice of an Angel?
Had I heard the voice of God?

Clearly, the Voice was within me:
the 'sound' wasn't sound as we know it,
and yet it was sound, just the same.

Thirty years have already gone by now
as I try to discover my Wings
to use them to soar to the heights.

Max Reif

The Life-Cycle Of A Toy

Where it came from
is a mystery
like the virgin birth.

A teacher unlocks
a cabinet one day
and brings it out,
a special thing
to be carefully
locked away again
when the play period ends.

The children delight
every time they see it.
They know it's a rare privilege
that must be savored.
They regard it
as grown-ups do
a fine wine

They begin to clamor for it daily.
After awhile it starts
to appear more often.

One day at clean-up time,
eluding the teacher's eye,
it gets dumped in a crate
with the general run of toys.

Thereafter it's no longer
kept under lock and key —
as though once out a whole night,
it's lost its pedigree.

The toy seems to thrive, though,
seemingly tired of elitism,
longing to know the common life.

But soon the children

start to take it for granted.
They grow tired
of its giving them
the same, predictable essence
day after day.
They want to extract from their toy
some new thrill.
They want a bicycle that can have a sweet taste,
They want a ball they can climb through.
They do everything they can
to expand its use —
throwing it, jumping on it,
bending it unnaturally.

A crash dummy at a test site
is not more endangered.
'Unbreakable' parts begin to snap.
Handles wear off.

Finally, the toy is simply
an object of abuse,
left outside every night
in cold and rain.
Even the teachers ignore it,
as if they're just
waiting for it to die.

One day a teacher walking past it
stops, realizes that it's become
more of a danger than a joy,

lifts it over to the other
side of the fence,
where it can await
a trip to the dumpster,
the mercy killing complete.

Max Reif

The Long Arm Of The Law

Wherever there are rules,
which is to say everywhere,
gradations of warnings and penalties
lead to a certain point

when the arm of force comes down
like a mechanical thing —
like one of those boxing gloves
shooting out from a metal grid.

A boy in the preschool play yard
who refuses to put on his shoes
when the Barefoot Flag's not up
is the same as a guy on the street
who refuses to move on
when the cops say move.

Polite admonishments come first,
then more serious ones,
an ultimatum and finally
a lift-and-carry
over screams.

The arm of the law
carries out impersonal orders.
It's an arm not connected to a heart.

Max Reif

The Miner

The miner works
the deep, dark earth,
far down a long, thin shaft,

discovering
and bringing up
the gold.

He does not
keep the gold,

nor does he.
want the gold itself,
but somehow to
become the gold.

Meanwhile, the gold
is currency
above the earth.

The miner goes
before the light,
to plumb
the lonely shaft again.

Maybe today he'll find
a vein containing
all he's never been,
a room with all
his dreams alive
and welcoming him home.

Max Reif

The Moment

The moment
love creeps in
enough to call it love,

formed from some kind
of embryo of love:

on a private computer chat this time,
a month or two after connecting
in the discussion group.

Letter by letter the words
'I love you' appear on screen,
typed by the person now my wife,
2,000 miles away,

the medicine beginning
immediately to sink
through my previously
impermeable shell

eliciting before long
the same words
like a reflection rising up
from a lush, deep pool in me,

drawing us together,
building a raft
on which we continue
to fare the seas

Max Reif

The Neighborhood (Revised)

Mr. Woods sat every afternoon on the front porch
of the grey stone house across the street from us.
Sometimes one of his daughters sat beside him.
Millie had said Mr. Woods was dying of cancer.

Once or twice my dad, on the way to his car,
waved and mumbled, "Hi, Woody". Mostly, though,
a thick veil had been drawn between our two worlds.

I saw their lives as a kind of pantomime.
Mrs. Woods would come and stand in the doorway
in her apron, then go, I imagined, back to her kitchen.
It was like watching a silent soap opera on TV.

There had to be some deeper mystery
why life lit up some homes on Waterman
and other stayed completely dark to us.
The sidewalk lit a bright path to the Mellmans'
five houses up the street— two boys our ages.
Our fathers too had been best friends as boys.

Carl Ebert, whom all the street heard arguing
with his aged mom as he walked to his car each morning
would always turn around and wave to me.

Mrs. Hahn, who was raised on the East Texas plains,
put palm to forehead whenever the dark clouds massed
and was quick to tell us, as she scanned the sky for funnels,
If we'd need to go down to the basement that afternoon.

But there were some whose lives were a mystery,
people I knew, yet did not know at all—
still others, whose names I'd never even learned,
walled away in the brown brick of their homes.

It was just that the Woods' lived right across the street.
From our front door window, *they* were the ones I saw—
whom I could not touch, to whom I could not speak.

The New Moon

Tonight in the fragrant air
The New Moon is a cradle
Hanging from the Evening Star.

Latin music on the car radio,
Dark forest on all sides-
As Beauty, God, that's how
You drive us mad!

Around a curve,
The cradle of the New Moon
Is almost touching the ground.

If I keep driving
Maybe I can climb
Onto that swing,

And like her
Become full,
Then quietly
Disappear.

Max Reif

The Old Baseball Field

Haven't walked here in a year—last time
it was all dug into World War I-like trenches,
pipes beside each, waiting to be installed.

I'd railed, from my mental trench, against the company
for ruining this green place along the bike path,
this oasis where I used to lie on my back
watching the clouds move or the daylight dim.

Now it's pristine again, the holes filled in,
edenic dew on the morning sprigs of grass.
The gas company has worked its sleight-of-hand,
and I try to reach, to take back all my rage.

Max Reif

The Other

Sartre had it half right.
Half of hell is other people,
the other half is not having them.

Two or three times I've been in auto collisions,
and once in awhile crossing aisles at a store
in that little 'you go this way and I'll go that way' dance,
sonar fails and I bump right into somebody—

But it seems almost every time I enter a room
I bump headlong into someone's mind,
caroming off their habits or their demands,
usually sending that person reeling off of mine.

Sages eternally tell us that we're all One.
That makes me want to go deep inside.
So I try to sit still and dive into that darkness,
till I find myself bumping off something in there, too.
Or else I slip through that barrier and find some peace.
Then I open my eyes and the whole world starts up again.

Max Reif

The Petition (Revision)

The Petition

The political guy accosted me
at the entrance to the BART.
'Are you a registered California voter? '
I had to admit I was.
Bright and cheery: 'I've got three petitions
for you to sign—for clean water, clean air,
and education.' My guard went up.
It always goes up.

I glanced at the petition,
saw the phrase 'cigarette tax'.
I'd heard a radio show
about its pros and cons—
some educated people believe
it will take money *away*
from education, because people
will quit smoking,
rather than pay so much.

To his standard pitch,
I gave my standard response:
'Oh, that's the cigarette tax.
I don't know...'

'That's the one for *education*!' '
he patiently explained,
but his patience
was fading a little.

'I'm not gonna sign today,
but can you tell me
the proposition numbers,
so I can do some research? '

'Just forget it!' he said,
withdrawing the petition
along with any pretense
of patience, so I couldn't sign it

even if I had a sudden
change of heart, and couldn't
even *see* the numbers.

'OK, ' I said, descending
into the escalator,
and I was the cheery one now.

Max Reif

Max Reif

The Poem Hunter

I sat all day in the blinds in the marsh,
trying to trap a poem.

I set my traps in the deep woods.

I dug a hole in the ice,
but the poems weren't biting.

The poems were too smart for me,
they were onto my ways.

They'd gotten my scent
and stayed away.

I was getting hungry,
starving for poems.

I was wasting away.

FEMA never brought me any poems.
The government never air-dropped
any Poems-Ready-To-Go.

At last, a small poem came by,
but it wasn't much,
it didn't have much meat.

I'm starting to think
these regions are all poemed out.
I need to head for a wilder place.

Max Reif

The Poem Of Spring

When the trees flower pink and white
filigree, and the sleeping
god comes back to life

here, where our mountains preside
so drably much of the year

now, when the walls of our valleys
are so green, green, green on all sides,
and our eyes see easy

before Nature gets carried away
and squeezes out too much Fire
and it all burns dead again,

you want to pin it
down with your pen
so it will never slip away,

this elixir,
this secret,

for there's nothing
I could ever seek
beyond this Spring

spreading inside me,
flooding my veins forever.

Max Reif

The Poem That Sits In My Notebook

I wrote it yesterday,
felt it stop the press of Time
till satisfaction,
sweet like after making love,
turned my every cell to honey
and when I could get up
I walked slowly,
weighing only a pound or so,
back to my car
under a weightless, almost colorless sky
that smiled without a mouth.

It sits in my notebook now,
I'll get it out and post it soon,

but I'm procrastinating,
it can't be as good as it felt yesterday,
and if it is, how can I ever write anything again,
and what will I do from now on?

Max Reif

The Poet As Addict (A Sea Chanty From The Seas Of Life)

This addiction is gettin' costly.
I knew it consumed me time.
Now it's taking me money too, mates.
Aye, me pockets are emptied by rhyme!

Listen, I swear by me story:
Feeling burned out last week,
I fled from poems on computer
And decided to go out to eat.

But over the crumbs of me bagel—
No matter I wasn't at home—
I scrawled an idea in me notebook,
And watched it becoming a poem!

Then I got meself in a frenzy
To post it before me work day,
And drove to the nearest Kinko's
To type up what I wanted to say.

I was lucky, the place had just opened.
Signing on the PC with me card,
I clicked to SUBMIT A NEW POEM
And typed away, fast and hard.

Of course, after postin' the effort,
I noticed a wrongly-placed word.
I toggled between VIEW and EDIT
Filled with passion to get meself heard.

Me watch, of course, kept on tickin'—
Ten minutes until me job's start.
I kept strugglin' to get the thing perfect
Fer the blinkin' love o' Art!

I logged off to get me card back
And to rapidly get myself hence,

But I stared in shock at the invoice:
Four dollars and thirty-three cents!

Four dollars and thirty-three cents, boys!
Four dollars and thirty-three cents!
Now I'm paying to get me poems posted,
Four dollars and thirty-three cents!

So if someday you walk by the poorhouse
And you see me in rags, standin' there,
Oh, pity your poor poet brother.
Toss him something to eat or to wear

And I'm sure the Muse will reward you.
But be careful, don't be like me.
Stay far from the Kinko's computer,
Where you pays as you writes poetry.

Max Reif

The Poet Clan

And if I write,
how does it mitigate
the difficulties
inherent in living?
And why
is it so important?

Once a poet
climbed down a mine shaft
and got buried in an avalanche
a thousand feet down
under a million tons of earth.

Pneumatic drills worked nonstop.
They finally opened a narrow hole
down which they sent
a bucket on a rope.

The poet sent back up
a simple note:
'At least I can write about it! '

If you are one of our clan,
you'll understand.

Max Reif

The Puppet

The puppet preens upon the stage.
The backdropp is his puppeteer,
whose screen winds into sturdy strings
that hold his mind in their tight grip,
controlling him without a slip.

The funhouse mirrors make him laugh,
then rage, then cry, or fear, or smile.
He is a most pathetic chap,
with no repose or true release.
The changing backdropp is his life.
Its calms give momentary peace,
until a storm starts up again.

He's tired of dancing to this tune,
whatever tune the backdropp plays—
the cheap effects, the tawdry days,
the heroines. The hero slays
a dragon, then gets slain himself.

He's tired of the plots and themes,
the comedies, the tragedies.
He knows by now his mind's a slave
to shadows within Plato's cave.
A close-up kiss, good deeds, crimes,
he's done them all a million times,

and yet, how does he cut the strings
to become radically unhinged—
to cry at joy and laugh at pain?
The world would see him as insane—

the shadow world, it's true, and yet,
the only world he knows, as yet.

To heed a whisper that he hears
deeper than his outer ears,
a voice—maybe, a voice to trust?
Else, all returns into mere dust.

Max Reif

The Python

When a new woman enters my life,
the time comes to introduce her
to the python of personal history
that I keep around as a pet.

I'm almost 58 now,
and the darn thing
has grown quite long!

I watch it
curling about her legs
as she reads its occult,
reticulated skin.

After awhile,
it sort of slides between us
and goes into hibernation,

but there's no way around it—
you have to introduce them.

Max Reif

The Quest

1.

The hero
seeks the holy grail
walking down Main Street,
driving the freeway —

2.

He seeks the antidote
to the belief he's *not*
enlightened.

For to exist
even in Your Dream,
O Great Imaginer,
is to glimpse
every cell divine.

3.

Thoughts run round the race-course
in the brain, the ruts of habit,

and in the grandstand the witness
is horrified by the spectacle,
so much traffic in these tired, old grooves.

4.

And the hero sits
in the garden of bewilderment,
a ball of knots
in his hands to unravel.

Max Reif

The Rainy Season

The rain's gone on two days,
I hope it goes on longer,
this welcome break from time.

The sun demands
a smile, a dance,
a day of work, or play.

The rain makes no demands,
It covers and it nurtures,

shelters seedlings
in its arms.

Max Reif

The Rainy Season (2)

The rain comes nearly every day now,
seems like it will always rain.
But those who've lived awhile here,
looking out from our umbrellas, know
that soon the rain will stop,
the hills will burn,
we'll long for wetness, as we
suffer through six months
without a drop.

Max Reif

The Shadow Box

1

In the Shadow Box,
one thing becomes another.
Nothing is fixed,
anything can become anything else:

the two men across the room,
whose whispering annoys me,
may become cows silently
grazing, with an occasional melodious 'Moo! '

World peace may break out any day.
We've seen presentiments of that before.

Inventions come from that Box—
the car, computers, electricity—
laughed at, at first,
they soon transform our world.

Nothing has yet
transformed the heart
of humankind,
but that too is possible.
Suppose there's someone in the Box
whose smile illumines all whose path he crosses;
the whole world will change.

2

I inhabit a life of disappointment,
in the doldrums of my middle years.
The bright pathways I took, when young,
toward love, career, and money,
have been obstructed for so long

that all I hope for now
is not to die—
or *to* die, even,
just not to incur the wrath
of Fate's 'other shoe'.

Yet the mind
that sees this picture
projects a frozen road.

The logic of yesterday
can never create Tomorrow!
Somewhere a witch has cast a spell!
Send her back to the Shadow Box#151
let the true Beloved
emerge in her place!
Stranger things have happened!

But, you say,
'Such things do not *just* happen.
They are an alchemy.
The force of change,
the Fire of awareness
—must come from you.

Then I shout, 'Yes! The freedom
to begin lies here with me—
that price I can pay! '

Max Reif

The Slide

The children,
possessed by a frenzy,
chase one another
around, upon, up and down
our giant slide structure.

Their chemistry
activates something
'demonic', uncontrollable.

A teacher points out to me
three children in the nearby sandbox,
looking like toy soldiers,
with colored, plastic buckets
upside-down on their heads,
the handles fitting like chin-straps.

'That's how normal children behave, '
she said, having seen children
come and go at our school
for a quarter-century.

We look back
to our Slide of Madness,
and I try unsuccessfully
to peer into the children's hearts.

When one gets violent,
as they tend to do,
I take the child off the slide.
'Tell _____ you're sorry, ' I say.
'Now go over to the sandbox
a little while. When you calm down,
you can come back and try again.'

The parents of these children
seem like good people,
some extraordinarily so.
Yet some of the children

seem to have a will toward frenzy,
a need to create a whirlwind,
and I feel the heart of darkness here
(but I know there's a greater Heart beneath it) .

They fight about everything,
until it seems the fighting itself
is the point,
not what they're fighting about.

Sometimes we hear at school
that a family's breaking up,
and in that case
the outbursts are as natural
as a supernova in the heavens —
cosmic, inherent in the laws
of the universe,
and we bring whatever gentleness,
whatever compassion and healing we can.

But often, when I gaze
into the children's hearts
as they run like monkeys
around the board,
it's too murky to see much.

And then of course,
after contemplating all this,
I'll turn to the morning paper...

Max Reif

The Stairwell Crooner

He loved to sing. As a younger man
he'd tried the club circuit,
but that had been a no-go.
Perhaps he'd been too shy
to perform in front of crowds.

Now, he sang in stairwells: great acoustics!
Arias, pop songs, show tunes...Nobody
ever saw him. He was always
A flight below, or above, But his voice
throbbled through the entire
stair vestibule of a building—
stirring, thick, authentic.
Closing your eyes, you could easily
imagine yourself at Carnegie Hall.

After some years, during which he became
a kind of legend, he disappeared.
No one ever knew if he'd died, or moved,
or retired. But hundreds of souls downtown
had been touched by the Stairwell Crooner,
and never ducked into a vestibule
to walk a few flights
in lieu of a slow elevator,
without remembering him,
and hearing again
his liquid voice
in their minds.

Max Reif

The Sun Comes Up

Endlessly hoeing
The drab rows
Of my garden,
I suddenly
Turn up
The Sun!

It was buried
There all along.
Its light breaks out.
I'm blinded!

I can't remember
Which was ground,
Which was sky,
What was garden

And where he
Ended and began,
That poor fellow
With the hoe!

Max Reif

The Temporal Blues

Does the endless 7-day cycle
our lives are structured into
get worn like an old leather binder
that's been opened again and again?

How many times, this pilgrimage
down the stations of the week,
before arriving at a timeless place?

I enter yet another 7-room house
and walk with one eye
to the details of each compartment —
dishes to wash, disorder to tidy —
and the other longing, longing, longing
for what lies completely beyond

Max Reif

The Terrorist

His wounds so deep
they cease to hurt,
for hurt is all he knows,

he has become
a rolling ball of pain

that speaks, in actions, pain,
says one word to the world — 'pain',

and will not stop
until the world's aflame.

Oh, if we could
take him in our arms

until there's nothing
left of pain

but small, white birds
that fly away

Max Reif

The Thief

A thief bored a hole
in the wall of a bank,
right into the safe.

He disabled the alarm,
made the perfect heist,
got away without detection,

went out into the world
to enjoy his labor's fruits.

For years he dissipated himself,
pursuing exotic pleasures,
but finally had to admit
that the faster he chased them,
the more he felt like a pauper,
all his wealth notwithstanding.

At last he gave up,
fleeing desperately into the jungle,
sat himself under a tree

and began there to reconnoiter
the Treasure within him.
For years he chipped away
at its vault, till at last one day,
he struck pay dirt.

He penetrated the real Fort Knox.
The Fountain of Love overflowed
and he basked in its riches.
He himself became a Treasury,

giving generously to all
who came to where he sat
naked under his tree
till the end of his days on earth.

The Tie

Dad taught me to tie it
to get a Cub Scout merit badge,
to shine my shoes for another one.
I was being groomed, literally,
to take my place in society.

A tie circled my neck
during the farce of my Bar Mitzvah,
a bow tie at the Junior Prom,

then ties every day that summer
after my first year of college
selling ads for the Apartment Guide
dad had decided to publish.

I was his hands in the world,
<i>just</i> the young man
to spring upon executives
who would always buy a page
from someone wanting
to become just like them.

We made enough that summer
to pay for my second
year at Northwestern.

Nine months later I was back,
but things had changed. War
had broken out, and I don't
mean Vietnam —

I'd had enough
of his hands
upon the body
of my psyche
and the direction
they'd pointed me in
on life's road.

This time, when he started
to shout at me, 'You stupid...! '
I had some leverage,
two powerful words:
'I quit! '

I pulled the tie off my neck
the way a man
whose death sentence
has just been commuted
might pull off a noose,

went straight
to the swimming pool
at my friend Michael's,
and dove in.

A few days later I drove
with my girl friend to Chicago
to visit a buddy there,

marvelling all the way
at the green and gold quilt
of the Illinois fields
like some real-world Oz
and at the rivers our land
is laden with.

I thought, 'My God,
this beats pounding
sidewalks in the hot sun! '
and vowed to find a way
to make a life and living
filling my eyes
with such wonders.

Back in St. Louis,
dad kicked me out of the house.
Every inch of the property
became turf in a power struggle.
I'd stop by to visit mom
and he'd start screaming again.

We'd wage war
right there on the front lawn.

Armed with the knowledge that I
could hurt him and had, I groped
toward an abstract pattern of light
like someone coming
up from under water,

my body feeling
my own for the first time.

Max Reif

The Uses Of Beauty

1

Father would take us to a slough
behind the Mississippi.
There, among the cypress stumps
we'd fish our Sunday afternoons away.

Once, as I sat with pole in hand,
something splashed
in a nearby pool.

I turned to see the rippling
water alive as silver
gleaming, rainbow forms
broke surface, then dove down
again in streamlined arcs.

It seemed the sun
itself had broken up
and come down there!
Apollo's fish, I wonder now,
swimming in their sacred pool?

I got my net and caught
those flashing wonders,
one by one, until
no more living miracle
disturbed that pool—
don't remember if
we even fried them up.

2

I remember, too,
the first time
I saw mountains.
Dad drove us
through the Ozarks,
down in Arkansas.

The highway wound,
and suddenly
a scenic overlook
of valley, hills and sky.
I felt my spirit
expand in wonder,

but after I'd looked awhile,
my thoughts caught up.
Body tense, my mind
churned restlessly:
'What do you *do*
with all that Beauty? '

3

Half a century has passed.
I look back at that boy and see
his restlessness

in wars and strip mines,
in the rape of land or persons,
the hunting
of a lovely deer.

He could not admire
those fish and
let them be,

for voices shouted in his head,
his knotted body shook with tics,
he harbored tales that he
was shamed to share.

How could he, then,
meet beauty
on her naked,
quiet terms?

This is the story
of our land and times:

until we're empty,
our self-hate
makes her
our victim.

Max Reif

The Zoo Director Is Not An Animal

The animals in the zoo must be taken care of,
but the Zoo Director who does it is not an animal.
He's studied the ideal diet of every species,
but he doesn't dine on hay or raw, red meat.
The animals roar or pace all day in their cages.
He too stays at the zoo, in his office,
but he has the run of the compound,
and at night goes home.

Max Reif

There Goes The Vacation

Like kings, we could
have sailed far seas
in cruise ships
of renown.

Instead, the space
between two teeth
we bridged
with *dental* crown.

Max Reif

This Moment

This moment on the road
St. Louis to Chicago
on a sunny day,

AC breze in my face,
hat band a little tight on my head, brim
coming down into my field of vision,

pen in hand, notebook
poised on the steering wheel,
specks of dirt on the windshield,

my body at perfect
rest on the cushioned seat

as the soothing green
corn and trees slide by
on both sides of the highway,

120 miles from St. Louis, 180 to Chi,
2250 since I left California,

58 years, 4 1/2 months
since the day of my birth
& who knows, till my death,

this moment in time,

many joys and horrors
vanished beyond
the horizon of the past,
their titrations residing as memories

this moment
I am competely happy

Max Reif

This Morning

Does it mean anything that the liquid
butter in my oatmeal today seems
to form an image of a drowning man?

Max Reif

This Point In Time

And have we moved yet
beyond the pregnant void,
the boiling *nigredo*
where worlds are destroyed
and new ones born,
gotterdamerung
where invisible gods preside,

beyond the barren landscapes
where an artist must draw
color out of himself,

beyond the blasted
century of war and revolution,

to the *Sat Yuga*,
in which images of unrefracted light,
harmonic symphonies,
bright colors

replace the atonal yawp?

Or must more towers
descend first into the churning
sea of change?

Max Reif

Time's Scythe

I stood atop the stairs
that overlook the parking area,
watched a stooped, white-haired lady
inch along with her walker,

white hair and coat amid
the sea of black asphalt.
I grew tired, even watching her,

then descended the stairs and crossed
the asphalt into the laundry room
assuaging my mind with the cliché,
'She must be so patient! '
and thinking that was the end of that.

Coming back out of the laundry room
five minutes later, I passed her
sitting on her walker to rest.
'You have to be so patient! ' I said
pleasantly in the
necessity of conversation.

'I must have been behind a door,
the day they gave
out patience! ' she replied,
and told me of three surgeries
that have left her this way
for the past three years.

'So I just go on like this, '
she smiled, as gracious
as a hostess.

'Are you getting *more* patient? '
I asked, hoping to hear someone,
somewhere reporting palpable progress
at something.

'Ask my husband about that! '
'

she said, and I walked
back up the stairs
with my still-good legs,

having heard from her exactly
what I would say
were our positions reversed,

and the stairs were like the years
to when I may indeed
be standing in her shoes.

Max Reif

Tired

This tiny circle of the known —
illuminated by dim light of ignorance.

The dullard who always seems
to get to the eyeholes first —

how to beat him there?

Max Reif

To Mother

1

In this morning's dream, you lived
in an elegant, old high-rise
atop a steep, rugged hill

whose sides had been built up
along a winding, narrow road
with ancient walls and terraces
running down to a great precipice
and a panoramic view of the city—

a city like St. Louis, but greater,
with the green Cathedral dome,
lots of red-roofed, public buildings
and thousands of colorful homes.

In the sky there, your condo adjoined
a little boutique that you ran.

2

In my earliest memories
you're only a voice from the kitchen
and sounds of pots and pans
rattling as I watched TV.

Certain years, the voltage of your nerves
charged every room in our house
and your outstretched palm
would strike like a quick
snake against my cheek.

How did you make the journey
up from those desolate flatlands?

3

You first ventured out of the house

to an art librarian's job at the University.
I went with you Saturday mornings in spring
as the dogwood trees blossomed on campus
and you showed me how to tell
a Renoir from a Monet.

Out of domestic imprisonment
you found your way year by year,
mentored by a wise crone
until you came to fill her shoes,
head librarian, grande dame
of the busy Clayton Branch.

4

Still, I was surprised to find you
up there, in my dream,
at the Center of Things.

You do still worry too much!
If you can't reach me on a Sunday
you imagine terrible things.

But you've come all that way
up that dream hill.
Now that you're retired,
you've still got luncheons to host,
dessert spoons to creatively arrange.
You've still got your flair for design,
your exercise class and bridge,
faithful relatives and friends.

I like to visit up there.
I enjoy the view on your hill.
I'd hope to have my own hill
and be able to see so far.

Max Reif

To My Real Father, From The War Zone

Because all things
are possible by Your Grace,
I won't give up.

Because life is impossible,
I have to rely on You.

Because I look at the map
of my own life
privy to a view
no other human shares,

seeing the land-mines
and the no-man's lands
and the detours
I've had to take,

Because I see this terrain
half a century into the War,

infrastructure bombed,
populations that will never recover
emotionally in their lifetime,

and because I know
how my steps are dogged
by hands that reach up
from quicksand memory,
my hope is in You.

The map I see
is less than the one
You Know.

Max Reif

To The Tree Outside My Window At The Old Rooming House

When I was an orphan
you took me in,
your branches were
my only green.

The moon
was a tenant in them, too,
my only other friend.

Back here in the old
neighborhood a couple days,
I thought I'd visit,

but you're gone too
and left no forwarding address.

Today I live in the sky
with a human
playmate I've found.

The moon stops by our place sometimes,
beams at us through the window
as we clatter our pots and pans.

I'll tell our old companion I was here,
and even if on her far-flung
travels she finds no trace of you,

your green still soothes me
and I can hear your leaf-lattice
murmuring in my heart.

Max Reif

Traveler's Manifesto

The hills and trees
await these eyes

to tell them tales
that can't be read
and don't show up
in photographs.

Max Reif

Treatise On Interpersonal Relations

In the workplace,
in the home,
amid smiles,
in silence,
the interpersonal
battle goes on:

The bulls of the out-going charge.
The feelings of the sensitive get trampled.
They withdraw and poison
the atmosphere with their resentment.

Some are skilled
with artifacts
of communication,
some have no tools
but the arrows
of their hatred.

But one day, deep inside
a wounded soul, birds
of emotion decide to fly forth,
toward the ears of companions.

Dark, sooty birds
turn white as they soar
out through the mouth,
down an ear and into a heart,
bringing reconciliation
like Noah's dove.

The air is clear,
as after a rain.
A new balance calms
and heals,
until...

Max Reif

Trying To Find Him

The problem is,
a family's a family,
and then when you grow up,
it may not be,

and when dad and I
sat in that booth at Denny's
a year before he died
and just before I moved
back here to California,

I tried to find the man
who'd held me once on his lap
and sang 'Sonny Boy, '
I tried to be that Sonny Boy,

but I searched in a flurry
through all the molecules
of available air
for some that might conduct
our love to one another again,

and I had to make do with the memory
and a gruff old man in front of me
who didn't seem to approve
of anything I did,
yet didn't want me to leave

Max Reif

Trying To Write Poetry While Listening To Shit

All the MacDonalds' have wireless now,
and this one in Blackhawk
is more like a Swedish modern cafe,

but today the stuff they're playing in the background
is more like American Neanderthal,
like those commercials with the caveman
wearing a suit and tie,
I forget what those are even trying to sell.

The production values
of this noise
are sophisticated,
but after an hour
of background organ
and drumbeat
a touch of disco
a touch of soul
without soul,

I'm pretty near insane.
Now though it's Harry Chapin,
'I'm gonna be like you, dad, '
always liked that one.

Back to my argument —
the psychology of muzak
is keep people from thinking
so they're happy-or 'happy',

and lately it's also take them back
to their roots, and everywhere I go,
since we babyboomers are so legion
and have money now,
the audio backdropp is the '60s,
not the wild '60s,
no Jimi or Janice or Jim,
but enough to make
my memories roll over fitfully

and sit up in bed,

though I wonder
how a 20 year-old
hears 'Eight Days a Week'
or 'Lyn' Eyes'
(and where *<i>is</i>* the 'cheatin' side of town',
by the way?) ,
devoid of old memories
of what they were doing
when those songs came out?

Now at Peets Coffee,
they play classical music
and the mind can hear itself,
somehow. But no wireless,
they said they're workin' on it.

The Righteous Brothers are on now,
'Baby, I can't make it without you, '
and I remember at our high school prom,
the cover artists joked
'I can't make you without it',
and I looked at the girl I was with
and tried to laugh in a carefree way
and look like everyone else,
all the while feeling fairly uncomfortable,
not knowing her
well enough to acknowledge
the existence of sex in the world.

Now 'every sha-la-la-la,
every whoa-whoa-whoa still shines'.
Napkins in the ears can only do so much,
I think I better get outa here

Max Reif

Two California Parks In Early Spring

I. Concord Skateboard Park

Sheltered in this smooth, round,
concrete nest of dips and curves,
obelisks and giant, Mayan steps

on a blind corner
hidden by small hills
from two busy streets
intersecting at its tip,

Twenty boys, 8 to 18,
practice their moves,
swiveling one-pointedly
up and down and around.

Some day they'll move on
from this birthing-ground,
swiveling down the decades
on a board or office chair.

A few girls watch,
Sprawled on the grass.
Behind them all,
flowering crabapples, palms,
then the mountains.

The city's wise to have
invested a few bucks
toward its future
in an old, vacant lot.

II. A Chant To Heather Farms Park

Sun of fire,
water of lake and fountain,
earth whose soil sustains the lawns,
and air of the sweet breath of spring:
the four elements are holding

a conclave here on this Sunday afternoon,

drawing many families,
and especially, today,
calling forth many sounds.

Oh, park of a basketball's steady bounce,
of lovers whispering in Russian
and the creaking rhythm of swings.

Park of car engines starting,
of families who laugh or talk
in Hindi, Bengali, English, Arabic,
and in goose-squawk and duck-flap,

Park of the slide of scooter wheels,
of loud feet chasing the one
who caught the football,
of a hand tapping the body of a guitar,
and a far-off, hip-hop radio.

Silent with pen,
o park of joy,
I take you home on paper,
I take you home in my heart.

Max Reif

Two Haiku

like green trees in drought,
you must draw from the unseen —
send your roots down deep

it's the man-made thunder
in the hills you must fear, my children —
its lightning will tear you apart.

Max Reif

Two Sides

I went forth this morning on a road
never traveled before, in a world
not yet dipped in Time's waters. I return
in the traffic and the exhaust, scarcely able
to wait until tomorrow.

Max Reif

Vacation

from here
over the next hill
all the way to the horizon,
like a vast, green expanse,
nothing to do

but stay in my bed if I want,
TV on or off, read & write,
go down to the computer.

after a few days
—because somehow we're always travelling—
the horizon's changed,
scattered with familiar obligations.

Time, you burglar,
I can't even see you,
it's not a fair fight!

Max Reif

Veil Of Dreams

In dreams I keep trying to find my way
back to the house of my childhood
and sometimes I end up getting lost.

I keep seeking out
my best childhood friend
with whom things ended
uncomfortably, long ago.

Thugs and killers haunt my dreams,
dwarves and people with running sores,
and angry parents.

There are strange weddings with no bride,
or a bride carrying shrunken heads,

and there are children
and old girl friends,
many women or girls I don't know,
and polished stones with God's Face on them.

When I read through these dreams
I still find them speaking
a language I don't understand.

Night's flying carpet takes me
to lost or forlorn worlds
and a few bright ones,

but I find myself
sitting here in the garish light
as if I've never been anywhere at all.

Max Reif

Vision: 'Freedom'

'Freedom':

an obese woman
at the register,
buying cigarettes
and candy bars.

Max Reif

Voices

And still I hear the voices
from the old house on Waterman,
living inside me now,
the house from whose every room
so many voices still call.

The doors between the rooms,
with their strong, solid statement of "No! "
were heroes who stood in the way
of the general soup of sounds
that tried to enmesh us all,

but the doors' locks were in disrepair
and the tongues of their latches frozen,
and a child did not have a chance
to collect his own, private thoughts,

and so the sounds seeped through,
and I didn't know who I was
amid the stream of shouts:

"Drop Dead! You're no good! "
from mother's nervous years,
from the kitchen and dining room.
"*Somebody* broke it! Someone! '
"You're stupid, you stupid, will ya! "
dad's rage, from the living room,

and from their bedroom,
"Your hair! Can't you wear it
back, like my mother's? "
And "Not that suit with that shirt! "

and my grandmother's voice, as well:
"You're a dicTator! " she'd shout.
and "always be one of the many, "

and my God, how did I grow up
to be as sane as I am?

Max Reif

Voices That Call Attention To Themselves

Who are those men
whose voices loud in a room
of talkers pierce
through the general drone
of words going up
like smoke, becoming indistinct,
or like the buzz of bees,
a mere collective sound —

whose words refuse to decompose like that
but, coarse with the husk of will,
remain distinct,
going out and pointing
a finger back to the speaker,
whose authority
becomes annoyance
to one with other business
or with no business at all,
only dreams?

Max Reif

Walking Two Successive Blocks Of The Iron Horse Trail

Pleasant Hill, CA

1.

Civilization. Carpet of grass.
A few trees here and there for shade.
Beyond the iron fence, red-roofed apartments.
Who squared us off like this?

I knew someone
who lived in Guatemala.
Said that in his village
there were no right angles.

No separate plane
looking out on Nature.

2.

This block's been left, benign neglect,
the plowed-up earth abandoned.
Wildness has gotten in!
Unruly marsh grass rises by the creek.
Tree shapes range in fractile profusion,
many different kinds of statements —

oaks and willows, pines,
quaking aspens, walnuts, olives,
and many kinds I do not know.

Small, white morning glories
snake across dry furrows.
Yellow wildflowers, thistles,
and oleanders thrive,

and near the street a tall date palm's
large frond-arms wave and boast,
'This green is the nectar
at the heart of everything.

Tear the world open,
and this is the juice you'll find.
Go mad! Go mad to find it!

(...19sept2)

Max Reif

Wanderlove

I am a boat
tethered to shore,
chained to the solid land.

I long to journey
out to sea,
as far as the waves will roll,
to islands and faway places,
as far as they'll carry me,

and only my Captain
reins me in,
chained by will to the land,
for I feel the rising swell of the waves,
and my blood calls to hourney far,
yes, the swell of my blood answers back.

But is it your Captain, or only fear,
a voice in a whisper asks?
And I stop in my thoughts,
and I have to admit
I really do not know,
I really do not know.

Max Reif

Waterfall

How is it such pure motion
can make a single, constant sound?

I close my eyes:
that's all I hear.

Perhaps we're like that, too —
in all our great activity,
each sounds a constant,
unique note.

Max Reif

What A Way To Die! (Ode To Poemhunter)

They found him
Under the rushing
Torrent of poems,
Dashed to pieces,
But his face was intact,
Smiling like the Buddha,
And a note in his pocket:
'I'm trying to read
Every new poem
That comes through here.'

Max Reif

What Is Poetry?

Try looking at it this way:

Poetry's in Existence

Like water in the ocean!

Today's CHRONICLE's a poem.

So is a fire engine going by,

A good cup of coffee,

A burned-out streetlight,

The supermarket checker's greeting,

An aquarium full of fish,

An old person facing the wall, alone.

Ah, but is anyone really qualified

To transcribe all these poems?

Where is the scribe

Who has dissolved himself

Entirely into his ink?

Max Reif

When Lost Love Drives A Poet's Pen

When lost love drives a poet's pen,
Who could ever condescend?

Lost love drives us
To drink or poetry—
<i>Anything</i> to fill the hole,
To vent a raging heart
Penned in a solitary cage,
Its bars made blackly visible
When a beloved leaves!

If writing out
a string of words
In blood or ink

Helps a soul to bear the burden,
Helps to relieve pain's potion,
Diluting it by sharing
With a sea of drinking minds
In some kind of sacred homeopathy,

Then worship such a poem!

If rhyme is all the order
A poet's skeletal life
Can cling to, for awhile,
Then celebrate such rhyme!

If only pens could heal like wands!
More likely, <i>therapeia</i> comes
From sober visions in the mirror
Made of words that flow from wounds,

Parting the clouds that hide us
From our own predicament:
Then it's time to get to work—
To face another sunrise,
See what Providence may bring.

Where The World Came From

I woke up this morning
And the world got out of bed before me.

The world got out of bed
Before I opened my eyes—
It was putting on its clothes,
And when I opened my eyes
It was fully dressed.

It's always like that.
I try to surprise the world
Getting out of bed,
But it's too fast.
It's like playing slap-hands
With your own shadow.

You're a sly one, world!
You were in your bed
In your deep cave
Way inside my eyes,
And when I opened them
You leaped out
And acted like you
Were always out here.

When I'm in my bed,
You're in your bed.
When I sleep,
Even my bed is in your bed,
Even my body has gone inside me.

Oh, how I'd like to
Wake up when sleeping.
You wouldn't be there,
I wouldn't be there.
But you're too
Good at your game.

I have to go on living

As though I'm in you, world,
Because I can never catch you
When you're in me,
There in my belly
Like Jonah in the whale.

Even the beggar
On the sidewalk
Knows the world
Came out of him.
That's why he's so confused —
He knows
He's really a king.

I can't tell these
People around here
That they came out
Of me, though,
They'd just deny it.

One in a million might say,
'No, *you* came out of *me*! '
And we could argue about it —
Or maybe something wonderful
would happen.

Max Reif

Why Read Poems?

Every poem
begins with a single
word, and usually
one I know. So far,
so good. Ready

to proceed. The next word
may shoot straight to a verb —
I smile, to know already who is doing what —
or it may go up a winding
road of phrases leading to
a tangled growth of clauses,

verb buried somewhere there,
unless it's a ghost, merely looking
down upon the poem.

Half my happiness
is knowing where I am.
Reading, I slowly build
a structure in my mind,

though sometimes the last stanza
of a perfect poem-house
turns out to be — a can-opener, *the square
root of two, a law of thermodynamics*,
anything but the closure I'd awaited,
and cold winds still
blow through the finished poem.

I try to bore through
blizzards of poems
like the railroad's
snow-blower car.

I like a sense of humor in a poem
even when not getting the joke,
for then I feel I've entered
something porous, loose, unlike

the long, surrealistic treatises
that wail like the siren
of an ambulance
heading to Bellevue,

or the strait-jacketed,
solemn pronouncements
of academic poems.

Why do I go on reading?
Because life on the street
doesn't often look at me
and speak my name, or smile.

What else is there,
but to go on poring through
anthologies of poems,
anthologies of sunbeams
anthologies of leaves of trees,
to find something speaking back
from the heart of
the mystery we are.

Max Reif

Wikipedia: Totem, And Taboo

The laws of kinship and membership
that applied to the tribes of the stone age
have now made the leap to the Internet—
remaining as binding as ever!

Have you heard of *Wikipedia*,
that fantastic resource
of hundreds of thousands of articles,
each peppered with photos and hotlinks,
one on any subject you think of?

I've been using it more and more,
and this morning I noticed
a note on a page:
Welcome to Wikipedia,
the free encyclopedia
that anyone can edit.

Suddenly, there before me
the fields of accumulated
human knowledge,
all orderly, green, and lovely,
lay awaiting my contribution.

Joyfully, I obliged them,
plowing their fertile furrows,
transplanting my delicate seedlings,
caressing tall, waving stalks.

I felt proud to have something to add there,
gleaned from 6 decades of living,
reading, observation and study.

An example: I found an article
about the Cathedral in St. Louis,
my home town, that never *mentioned*
the building contains more mosaic art
than any other structure on earth!

I added a sentence of text
and put in a link to the photos
I'd taken of those mosaic ceilings,
as fine as any in Europe,

and felt part of the great human lineage
that has *brought* us here from the stone age
on the shoulders of shoulders of giants,
those giants on shoulder too,
as far back as anyone knows.

I was startled out of this reverie
by a notice that appeared on the screen
at the top of a Wikipedia page:
You have new messages!

Bewildered, I clicked on that tab.
A site sentinel named *'davidbd'*
had removed every word I'd just added,

and left this note of his own:
*'If you advertise your website here,
we'll block you from editing pages at all! '*

Ah, the guardian at the Gate!
I hadn't been advertising,
unless you call relevant content an ad,

but I realized I'd transgressed an ancient law.
All things on earth have strings attached.
If anything looks too good to be true,

it is! Every human endeavor
emanates from some *community,*
whose invisible, ethereal wires
tether things in their places.

These laws are the custodians
of all we hold dear.
There are *protocols* for entry,
and were that not the case,
we would likely not have

survived evolution at all.

And so, for the thousandth time in my life
I sigh at my naivete'
and humbled, prepare to go 'round
and knock on the front door for entry—

proceeding with the learning
that really matters,
the physics of human relations.

ps: If any of this is obscure to you,
check the article on Anthropology—
at [*<i></i>*](#).

Max Reif

Wild Turkeys On The Road Near Home

Tribal elders in their feathered garb
pow-wow in the middle of the road.
Bright red wattles shake
from bright blue faces

(reminding me of
rabid football fans) .

Smiling drivers stop,
though with a slight discomfort

to see something so ancient
that Johnny-come-lately, reason,
makes no sense of it at all.

Max Reif

Winter Sonnet: Awaiting The Iraq War

Snow of innocence, cover this fallen world.
Your blanket blots, in purifying white,
And blurs, our human legacies of blight.
Hail, flurry-flying flag of peace unfurled!

Oh, stop us in our common rush to war,
Our daily rounds that drive us all askew!
Blizzard the footprints of the past with new
Fields of such unity as no boot will mar.

Your mantle over all created things
God from His thoughtful, furrowed brow lets fly
Down through the grey, impenetrable sky,
Connectedness—White Revelation—brings.

Put to sleep our angry flames of violence.
Freeze us, even, till we hear Your Silence.

Max Reif

Wisdom From The Air

1

A person should be able to make
SOME profound statement
After flying across the continent
30,000 feet in the air, don't you think?
Even an Everest mountaineer
Has nothing on us in terms of altitude.

But each time I disembark from a plane,
The only statements that occur to me
Are 'Sure is a big country! ' and such cliches.
So I generally keep my mouth shut.

This time, though,
I'm determined to say SOMETHING!

2

Flying above Bryce Canyon, Utah:
Someone's taken in one giant hand a palette
Overflowing with every conceivable shade
On a red to brown scale-
All possible yellows and oranges
Reds and beiges,
Umbers and siennas-

And in the other hand
Huge quantities of rock and sand,
And flung them randomly
Over an inconceivably vast area.

For the first time I really see
What people mean
By 'Southwest Colors'!

3

Imperceptibly, geography changes
To all-beige, as far as eyes can see.

Suddenly in the middle of this desert incongruously
Appear four of those round, green splotches
I've always assumed are irrigated crops-
Tightly scrunched, a lovely, deep emerald,
Together describing a square, four and only four
Of these strange circles in the wilderness,
No building, no visible road going by.

Half an hour later these mandalas
Begin to appear with more regularity,
As though the four were hardy pioneers.

I try to read the braille of geography:
The patchwork of fields, the dots
Of semi-arid, forested hills,
The bold escarpments.

Sometimes God speaks
Like an abstract expressionist.

4

I close my eyes to meditate,
Open them awhile later.
Now plump, irregular clouds cast
Mirthful dragon-shadows on the ground,

This new display repeating
Comically to the horizon
The way every pattern has today,
Like computer wallpaper.

5

Finally, we descend into Dallas,
A mighty, moist green metropolis.
I can almost feel the heat from the air.

In the subdivisions that curl below
Like the tentacles of jellyfish,
Lots of sky-blue swimming pools.

They always paint swimming pools sky-blue,

I suddenly realize. Never bright red.
Never screaming pink or deep purple:
Now there's an insight.

Max Reif

Wish?

A businessman with a ponytail
is what I'd like to be,
with sport coat, tie, and briefcase —
and the world's eyes on me.

Max Reif

Word Magic

Prospero waves his wand:

the words asleep in the dictionary
arise, flapping black wings.
Filling the sky with chaos
they fly in his eye, out his ear,
or the other way around,
dipping their wings in his memories
before settling down on the page
where they roost in luminous patterns.

A reader opens a book:

can you hear the cacaphony?
The sky is blackened again,
as they make for his head and his heart,
some for his limbs or his neck.

That's what fools don't see
in the writing, the reading of poems.

Max Reif

Working On A Poem With George

I got there strung out
on sleeplessness
and too much coffee.
I told him so,
saying I'd do my best,

and he said that was fine,
and giving me a glass
of water, led me to the glass
dining-room table, a stack
of papers and a pencil
waiting at each end.

He sat at one end,
I at the other,
and there we were.
My mind felt like a car
that revved and died,

but George proceeded calmly,
reading me the lines
he thought needed work.

My crippled mind gave me ideas,
and with nothing else to do
as time flicked by in the space,
the vast space between us,

I passed them on to George.
He considered each, tried it out,
sometimes used my word or phrase,
sometimes used it as a stepping-stone
to find his own.

George honored
the silence and the time,

and I began to, too.
I saw my mind,

that limping, hobbled bird,
could hop, then fly
as well as any.

Later, walking out the door,
well-fed by fires of concentration,
my mind and body both

flew from that perch
into a surprise
paradise newly created
while I'd been indoors,

my spirit intoxicated by
the liquor of the breeze,
eyes oozing
the honey of seeing.

Max Reif

Worlds

There's a world when I rise
on a Saturday morning,
a dawning world stretched out
like an infinite ocean before me,
and I, Henry the Navigator at the wheel
venturing out into its virgin air,
and the light coming on gradually
as if it doesn't want to startle my eyes,
the hills grey-blue with touches of pink
gleaming from the windows,
the bare-branched trees' expressive arms
reaching up, perfectly, neutrally brown,
like the antlers of thousands of deer,
and I, the first man on the first morning again,
infinity already gained as I roll
on to successive infinities,

and there's another world
climbing the steep grade out of bed,
another impossible weekday waiting,
rewards so interspersed with difficulty
as to feel barely worth my effort,
another day that calls
for skills I do not have
and don't know how to get,
(we all go through period like this, don't we?)
and I wonder how that vast
ocean of a Saturday morning world
shut down into this tight fist,

and whether that virgin land
I entered that day
was but a sweet mirage...

Max Reif

Worms Are The Christ Of Small Children

Worms are the Christ
of small children,
who love to pull
fat, wriggling things
from dark earth.

They walk about
with the creature
in an outstretched palm.
'He likes me! ' one child
marvels with wide eyes.

Petting the worm,
they don't notice
it's moving less and less,

Or they leave it
in the 'worm-box'
without soil,
carrying the box
around by the handle,
explaining the worm's inertness:
'He must be taking a nap.'

Max Reif

Writer's Mission Statement

That grail
to deliver
unto humankind,

filled with
pure essence,

for those
who are
ready to drink;

that lamp,
lit with oil
of pure, refined
residue of experience,

burning brightly
to illumine
those who are
ready to see:

to deliver the goods,
and after that
my body can depart,
and I will still
be here, giving.

Max Reif

Yes, Death Is A Fact Of Life

Yes, death is a fact of life,
but as I put up the memorial
web page for departed
high school classmates
prior to our 40th reunion,

it's a mystery where
they can have gone.

I just learned
about the demise
of half of them.
They seemed fine until then.
I didn't see any of them expire.
I only visited one in the hospital,
and that was way back
in our junior year.

As I look at their yearbook pictures,
something about them still jangles
like money in their pockets.

Laughter still sings
from the faces
of a few who were jokers.
One girl's still being dramatic.

There's a place where
my high school lives
just as it was forty years ago,
these people
still walking its halls.

Max Reif

Yogic Poem: Your Mind's A Radio

Don't you know your mind's a radio,
Playing back the frequencies
That you imbibe all day?

Too much of the world's sound
Can drown you in its endless noise.

Tune your radio to OM,
The Highest Frequency, each day.

Then trade songs with the world
And you'll all receive a gift.

Max Reif

You Can'T Possess A Woman

You can't possess a woman,
just her body, for a few moments,
moments like bright flowers
whose fragrance lingers awhile
and whose memory is sweet.

But such intense, classical moments,
with arms around Beauty herself

can even augment separation
when you each return to your world
with its habits and temperament
and something comes up between you,
some little point of contention
which inflates, till it fills the room.

The body's a meeting point
with a special intensity,
but only one meeting point,
a parlour in the house of the Soul.

Max Reif

Your Fathers (1985)

Your fathers enjoyed things,
your fathers got their hearts broken too.
They were young, they were small,
they were cared for by their parents,
they saw the snow in the city
for the first time and wondered.

They found themselves suddenly big
and wondered where childhood
had gone like clothes outgrown,
They found the world suddenly difficult
and wondered where Magic had gone,
and the shock was so painful they decided
to forget there ever was such a thing as Magic.

In their hearts now are horses and carts
and snowy streets from fifty years ago,
Chagall expressed such memories,
but they don't know how.

Your fathers lingered in a small world just like you
Fifteen years to find it gone like water left in the sun.
They sipped and dawdled the morning
only to find all at once, harsh afternoon light.

Your fathers' fathers were a world of mist and green,
a primeval world rising out of non-being for your fathers,
a world they kissed goodbye,
as you will kiss your fathers goodbye
and your son will kiss you.

Fathers who rise on one horizon and set on another,
that is all we ever have,
and we are forever saying goodbye,
and hello.

Max Reif

Youth

Youth, my untried powers
and the crimson glow of dawn,

youth and its infinite horizon,

youth, when I looked forward to
infinite freedom and went
flying off cliffs,
and crashed

Max Reif