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## The Lives of Isaac

*Jeff Friedman*

I was born a Jew  
who could sell a riddle  
to the sphinx. In my mouth  
nouns married adjectives  
and entered the world  
as a sales pitch—  
a quick hard sell,  
offer driven,  
Big Value for a Buck.  
I had fleshy features,  
small sturdy hands  
and sawed-off white teeth  
that could tear small  
pieces of meat easily.  
I carried no insurance  
and died eating.  
Then I was born a dog  
who lived off scraps  
and sniffed the messages  
the wind delivered.  
Each time I stole  
from my master

my tail betrayed me.  
 When the herds dwindled to wind  
 and the tents collapsed  
 like a city of matchsticks  
 I ran with jackals  
 warning off intruders  
 with low deep growls  
 as we ripped apart carrion  
 and snapped flies  
 from the dust laden air.  
 Before I was 20,  
 my heart gave out.  
 Then I was born a laugh  
 and came out of a parched orifice.  
 I died in mid-air.  
 And I was born a mixed blessing.  
 My sighs grew persistent  
 over the years  
 like a cramp in the intestines.  
 My face grew pinched,  
 my mouth distended  
 around an endless vowel.  
 I passed away in sleep.  
 Then I was born 2 dice  
 rolling across pavement.  
 I came out snake eyes.  
 I came out a bad decision.  
 I was born an invisible bird  
 that nested in the chest  
 of a prophet  
 and flew out of his mouth  
 in guttural ejaculations,  
 aiming for the eyes of his enemies.

I broke down into molecules,  
 into atoms, into electrons  
 spinning out of control,  
 shot down a racetrack—  
 broke down into quarks.  
 And then I was born a desert,  
 a promise never fulfilled.  
 My tongue thickened.  
 My mother sacrificed herself  
 again and again  
 while the soup boiled.  
 My father laid me out  
 on a table, brandishing his blade.  
 He lifted the knife  
 above his head and I  
 could see the sincerity  
 in his dark brown eyes.  
 And so I lived on  
 as words live,  
 blocks of print  
 on parchment.  
 My mother conceived me  
 well into her 70s  
 and on the night of my birth  
 the star of my kingdom  
 lit up the heavens.  
 With each telling  
 I grow stronger.

*Jeff Friedman's poems have appeared in The American Poetry Review, Poetry, The Antioch Review, Midstream, and The Missouri Review. His first book, The Record-Breaking Heat Wave, was published by MkMk Press at University of Missouri-Kansas City.*