

Title of Submission: "Five Poems for Sixfold"

The Test

I've been waiting all my life  
for the three angels who visited Abram in the Old Testament.  
I'd see them coming from the distance.

They'll tell me they are travelers from far away,  
are hungry and their throats are as dry as a riverbed in Los Angeles.  
I've heard I should sit them down, wash their feet, offer them spring water, dates,  
feed their camels and ask them how I can help them.

I'll know who they really are  
even though they are smiling shyly, looking at me, not at each other.  
Maybe they won't have camels, this is Brooklyn, 1962. Maybe a rusting '37 *Cord*  
and I won't be in a tent, it'll be a row house on Avenue K, off of Kings Highway.  
This would be one of those tests the angels come up with,  
like sacrificing your son,  
your only son.

But wait.

I'm only a kid.  
I've already been tested and have never gotten the prize:  
wealth, or descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. No one  
has ever made a great nation of me.

In New York, in every neighborhood, every block  
had boys who measured themselves against  
the kids who were foolish enough  
to walk alone or were smaller, younger or weaker.  
It was *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*,  
these boys were the pack of wolves  
trying to keep the deer population down, demonstrating the survival of the fittest,  
and me,  
I was running for my life so I could reproduce someday.

I became deeply religious praying before bed that I would outrun these kids the next day.  
All my pants had blown out knees from being thrown down to the pavement.  
I stopped taking the school bus.

[Stanza Break]

Finally, our peril was too much for my father to bear.  
He took me, my brother and a friend, Steiny, to Al Roon's Health Club on Bedford Avenue,  
where he paid to have his sons beaten to a pulp.

The philosophy was to climb into the ring with a professional boxer  
who would hit us until we defended ourselves.

It wasn't a good strategy.

We did this for a for several weeks  
till Steiny got punched in the side  
and his swollen appendix burst  
ending our adventure in the world of self-defense.

This brings me back to the Angels...  
I saw them going into Kalman Schlissel's house directly across Avenue K,  
the three men walking up the brick steps,  
dressed in black suits, white shirts, narrow ties,  
the screen door slamming behind them.

His mom peering right and left, before closing the wooden door.  
Kalman, my age, but much larger, was pulling the camels past the fire call box,  
to his tiny back yard, the beasts grunting, moaning, hissing.

Three weeks later the Schlissels moved to Forest Hills.  
He passed the test.

## The Family Business

By this time,  
I was in the business  
and enjoying it,  
working for my father during the day,  
art school at night.  
There was the delicious thrill  
of knowing my father man to man,  
of having the illusion that I was his equal.  
Eugene came to us with a bad reputation,  
been employed by  
one of our competitors,  
played on his heart condition,  
during negotiations  
talked about mark-ups,  
not about payoffs,  
*his* cost of doing business.  
Eugene was without profits.  
Our warehouse was choked  
with his printed cartons that  
could only be sold to  
to one customer, *his* customer.

I talked to dad.  
“Don’t do it,” I told him.  
No one trusted Eugene.  
“We’re not smart enough  
to keep track of him.”  
And my father smiled one of those smiles.  
It is a smile that I see on my brother  
when he tells me, without saying it  
that all is lost;  
it is a smile that I give to Cray Little  
as I binge off a diet  
that says there is no hope.  
We are trapped by a defect  
of personality that force of will  
cannot correct or override,  
that smile. It’s a smile  
of sadness, of self-recognition.

[Stanza Break]

So, we took Eugene in,  
his brother-in-law  
and son-in-law.  
I could see it in their eyes  
that they knew Eugene –  
and were up to their necks.  
And I watched my father  
as we met across the street  
at Angelo's, talking.  
Their accounts weren't paying  
and the bills kept coming.  
My father was dead six months later.  
He would've died anyway.  
I was sitting Shiva  
but coming into work,  
I was in the business for life,  
dropped art school.  
I smiled that smile to  
Jop and Fellows the night Dad died.

Eugene called me the next day.  
He hadn't gotten his commission check.  
I was sitting in my father's chair,  
and Eugene was crying over the phone,  
he needed the money, his heart, his heart,  
and I wasn't going to give it  
and his voice rose and he became shrill  
and he wanted his god damn check,  
"Listen you young jerk!"  
and in his anger, he let it slip,  
it was for a down payment  
for a car he'd promised his daughter.  
My bank said he had already cashed his check,  
he was just playing on our grief.

## Exile

i

Grandpa never talked of the old country.  
He loved America, joined the Army,  
caught Norman Vincent Peale  
Sunday nights never owned a car, rode the IRT  
with the Irish, the Italians, the Negroes, the Poles.  
Came to New York via Ellis Island,  
the surly immigration officer  
snatched his surname. He gave it up willingly.  
Russian *Borsik* for American *Brown*.  
*Israel Brown*, marched, swinging his arms,  
paid taxes, polished his laced black high tops  
exercised in the dark, squeezed oranges  
by hand, went to synagogue every day.

ii

I love New York as much as Izzy did.  
I count every day the things I've forgotten;  
the blue terracotta of the Astor Place  
subway stop, cobble stones on Broome Street,  
doormen standing erect like robins at the curb.  
Sniff, I knew which neighborhood, which borough.  
The great rivers, living creatures, called to me.  
The ocean, waited to take me in  
to massage or slap me.

I'm the exile my grandfather wasn't.  
He came *towards*, I went away *from*.  
They took my passport, escorted me across  
the Hudson onto the poisoned mainland.  
I'm too far away to look longingly  
at the skyline, to smell trash at corners,  
to lean against the chain link fence.

## The Oath

To me, it seems biblical,  
forty years ago,  
the gift my father gave me,  
an offer to pay for art school  
while I worked for him.  
I have the agreement,  
folded, in my wallet,  
with two *Get Out of Jail Free* cards,  
that grants the bearer  
permission to do whatever they want,  
say whatever they care to.  
I pull one out now  
and repeat the oath,  
“I will be an artist: a poet;  
stack my clichés alphabetically  
in a pickle barrel,  
I will write till the ink drains  
from the tip of my ball point pen,  
I will walk the metaphorical tightrope  
balancing all I possess,  
reach past my shoulder for the words  
that fly around my deranged brain.”

*At the End*

*For Dr. Maan Jokadar*

At the end  
I didn't sense  
the musty breath  
of death  
spreading toward Vita.

Instead,  
I smelled a faint  
combination of quinine  
and witch hazel,  
I sensed an angel,  
sandaled, robed,  
enormous,  
patiently waiting  
to lift her  
soul up,  
the companion  
that had been  
there all her  
short life,  
to be  
with her,  
to carry her  
to her grandmother,  
be with her  
to calm her fear,  
be with her so she  
wasn't alone,  
be with her,  
even though  
she never knew  
he was there.

And he was always there,  
there to protect  
her from the  
savage kids  
who pushed her off  
the jungle gym,

[No Stanza Break]

from the girl who  
withheld the float  
in the swimming pool  
so Vita would struggle  
to safety.

He was there  
to guide the surgeons' hands  
for those tricky operations,  
to direct her on city streets,  
to deflect the cars and trucks,  
to lead her to  
friends who were there  
to strengthen  
her will and determination,  
to cloak her from harassment.

I am satisfied,  
she had 29 years  
on this earth,  
sorry that the fates  
cut the yarn of her life short,  
turned things around so nothing  
went her way.  
Every path  
was a dead end,  
every doctor  
but one, blinded  
by ego and hubris.

A wheel was turning  
and our every move  
was thwarted,  
from protecting  
this daughter,  
this woman,  
this ray of hope.  
It was four years ago,  
she dragged her oxygen tank  
from the curb  
to the theatre  
to go to work,

[No Stanza Break]



after her shift,  
crawled into bed,  
frightened about  
what was happening,  
took her pills  
and settled in  
for the night  
while I read  
to her,  
praying there'd  
be a way to save her.  
My prayers had  
always been answered  
up to now,  
but she missed that  
last sunrise,  
the angel had  
carried her off  
leaving her mother  
and father  
to kiss her head, close  
her eyes  
and wait in  
the stillness  
after we said  
goodbye