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Preschool Visitation

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Preschool Visitation · *Laurence Goldstein*

*There is for every man some one scene,
some one adventure, some one picture
that is the image of his secret life,
for wisdom first speaks in images.*
— *W. B. Yeats*

The troops had come home, not quite American,
more like steerage, quarrelsome refugees,
unwilling grease monkeys, flatfeet, scabs.
The Nazis lived on as invective, their camps
the everlasting site of family wrangles.
Even at three, the meaning of life struck me
as sorrowful, my Russian grandfather slapping
my left hand when I started to write or draw.
War baby, sinister only child
of a rich country recovering from a crusade.

Los Angeles had its little Israels;
we lived in one, before it changed color,
in one of many courts close to the butcher shop,
part of the fish-man's route, and vegetable-man's
and the bearded man's in black who took money
and gave it to Palestine, *where we all should go*.
I found the spot on a map. Was this my destiny,
to wrest Jerusalem from the ruthless Canaanites?
Then it was war again, and our quarters
helped feed a Joshua's army of emigrants.

These were grown-up problems, thank God.
I was five, poised to enter kindergarten,
and daily I circled the school's twisted fence,
peering beyond the foursquare and tether-ball
into rooms with wall-maps, globes, and shelves

groaning with hieroglyphs of the Golden State.
Let me in: the caption on this movie still.
Russia was our enemy, one boy whispered
through the rusting iron, “and there are bombs
that can blow up the whole stinking world.”

So what did it matter, when an invitation
summoned me for afternoon play with a girl
who would sit next week as another stranger
in those tan desks with crayon and pencil trays,
some daughter of the next block who knew me
only by sight, that gaunt kid passing
the house, hanging on the fence like a DP?
She was Alice Obregón who wore party dresses
all the time, my mother said, a sign
of high-caste hispanic origins.

Something was consequential, for I was dressed
in my seder clothes, and told some etiquette
and sent alone, a gentleman caller, to her door.
Alice came at me with a leap of animal joy,
twirling her green skirt with crimson sash.
Unsettled, I entered my first gentile residence.
Wall-hangings everywhere; no plaque of Roosevelt
or classic paintings but fabric of bizarre design
and furniture that smelled like Western movies,
pungent leather and sheepskin that made me sneeze.

Would I like some tea or café? I was a ghost
with no informal speech for this Princess
who sat us down to a china service and poured
rainbows of juice from mango and cantaloupe.
A servant set out strangely-spiced cakes
dark-skinned and moist; I savored their sesame
while dolls of doeskin in lace with gold buttons
huddled with Their Lady. How beautifully
Alice’s mother pronounced *Los Angeles*, and
Santa Monica, her nasals a new music.

We were playing house, Alice and I,
wifey at the patio fountain with her mate,
the very doubles of my folks on Saturday night
dressed for nothing more than movies, or prime-
rib at a swell roadhouse— and how
I felt struck by the lightning of *my* role,
chattering who-knows-what nonsense
with cosmopolitan *élan* as Alice
beamed domestically at her social triumph.
Now I was two people, barely tilted

toward the shiksa bride I found in college
and the protocols outside my heritage,
half-secret like the sin of assimilation.
In the treasure house of her ancestral land
Alice made me civil, not her Cid
but no longer, quite, the yid who feared
every native type and shade of the unknown.
Why else in the nineties would I recall
one communion among so many afternoons?

And how unlikely it is that Alice
of whom I remember nothing more, who
I left behind after a year, when
my parents crossed La Cienega,
following our kin further west,
has summoned in thought that fugitive boy.
Yet neither of us is lost. Alice
stands in an aura beside the person she is,
a bright quetzal caged in my domain,
perpetually waiting under her roof of red tile.