

## 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.