27. How I Got Here

What chance incidents or choices in your life or those of your parents resulted in your birth or your present situation in life? The poem will be quite personal, but fill it with image and the sort of particulars with potential to open up into the universal.

Why I'm Here

Because my mother was on a date with a man in the band, and my father, thinking she was alone, asked her to dance. And because, years earlier, my father dug a foxhole but his buddy sick with the flu, asked him for it, so he dug another for himself. In the night the first hole was shelled. I'm here because my mother was twenty-seven and in the '50s that was old to still be single. And because my father wouldn't work on weapons, though he was an atomic engineer. My mother, having gone to Berkeley, liked that. My father liked that she didn't eat like a bird when he took her to the best restaurant in L.A. The rest of the reasons are long gone. One decides to get dressed, go out, though she'd rather stay home, but no, melancholy must be battled through, so the skirt, the cinched belt, the shoes, and a life is changed. I'm here because Jews were hated so my grandparents left their villages, came to America, married one who could cook, one whose brother had a business, married longing and disappointment and secured in this way the future.

It's good to treasure the gift, but good to see that it wasn't really meant for you. The feeling that it couldn't have been otherwise is just a feeling. My family
around the patio table in July.
I’ve taken over the barbequing
that used to be my father’s job, ask him
how many coals, though I know how many.
We’ve been gathering here for years,
so I believe we will go on forever.
It’s right to praise the random,
the tiny god of probability that brought us here,
to praise not meaning, but feeling, the still-warm
sky at dusk, the light that lingers and the night
that when it comes is gentle.

Jacqueline Berger

Possibilities

Today I drove past a house
we almost bought and heard
through the open window music
made by some other family.
We don’t make music ourselves, in fact
we define our differences
by what we listen to.
And what we mean by family
has changed since then
as we grew larger then smaller again
in ways we knew would happen
and yet didn’t expect.

Each choice is a winnowing,
and sometimes at night I hear
all the possibilities creak open
and shut like screeendoors
in the wind,
making an almost musical
accompaniment
to what I know
of love and history.

Linda Pastan
from Heroes in Disguise: Poems
One of the Lives

If I had not met the red-haired boy whose father
  had broken a leg parachuting into Provence
to join the resistance in the final stage of the war
  and so had been killed there as the Germans were moving north
out of Italy and if the friend who was with him
  as he was dying had not had an elder brother
who also died quite differently in peacetime
  leaving two children one of them with bad health
who had been kept out of school for a whole year by an illness
  and if I had written anything else at the top
of the examination form where it said college
  of your choice or the questions that day had been
put differently and if a young woman in Kittanning
  had not taught my father to drive at the age of twenty
so that he got the job with the pastor of the big church
  in Pittsburgh where my mother was working and if
my mother had not lost both parents when she was a child
  so that she had to go to her grandmother’s in Pittsburgh
I would not have found myself on an iron cot
  with my head by the fireplace of a stone farmhouse
that had stood empty since some time before I was born
  I would not have traveled so far to lie shivering
with fever though I was wrapped in everything in the house
  not have watched the unctuous doctor hold up his needle
at the window in the rain light of October
  I would not have seen through the cracked pane of the darkening
valley with its river sliding past the amber mountains
  nor have awakened hearing plums fall in the small hour
thinking I knew where I was as I heard them fall

W.S. Merwin
from *Vixen*