

Why I'm Here

by Jacqueline Berger

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.

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