

had their own guns, of course, but were handicapped by being stupid and so unbelievably bad we knew they had to lose, or what was the point of goodness?

Every day we sat on the floor and watched them, after we'd made our escape from school – Roy Rogers, Hopalong, the Lone Ranger galloped to the rescue while our fathers, wearing hats, were heading home for dinner, riding in trains and car pools. How we wished for silver stallions to ride instead of beat-up Schwinn!

Like cowboys tied to chairs with our guns out of reach on the table, we were stuck in the unrescuable state of childhood, bound by homework and chores. We believed we could master the thousand ways they taught us to escape – the candle flame, the broken glass, the signal flashed to the good Indian hiding outside the cabin.

No girl dreamed of being that goody-goody sidekick, Dale Evans. We would twirl lariats, wear chaps, and ride after bad guys every day. Sometimes we would even help Roy escape from the abandoned mine, bind up his wounds with one hand and gun down desperadoes with the other.

It was hard to believe our mothers could tell us to get up and set the table, or run to take in backyard laundry from the rain. To rescue our dignity, we obeyed, muttering that we would run away for good and live on a ranch if only we could get the train conductors to believe that we were older. Now we are older —

and not one of us is riding down bad guys through the dust. Where are our trusty horses? Our guns? Our bunk beds

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on the ranch? A weekend in Vermont is our "escape,"  
and our children, watching medics holler "clear!"  
and gangsters escaping with semi-automatics, would laugh  
at our dreams of rescue – those leaps to horseback,

those bloodless chases, those miniature six-guns.  
They know it's not easy as black and white to tell  
the bad from the good, and that when you're tied up  
with the fuse burning, you can forget about riding  
back to the Bar-B Ranch beside the blonde. Yet  
somehow, we secretly believe that we're too good

to end up losing. Before the sun sets, one more  
beyond-belief rescue! There are a thousand ways —  
the fuse fizzes, the bad guy drops the gun,  
the sidekick escapes, and listen! – over the hill,  
the cavalry comes riding!

## *Corners and Edges*

*Carol Bryan Cook*

I've teetered on the edge  
turned every comer  
walked without direction  
fallen off the ledge

found love that didn't last  
trusted the wrong friend

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stumbled around in a blur  
run from a sorry past

survived, a bit broken, bent  
for sure rounded my last comer  
taken my last trip to the edge  
never return to the hell I was sent

## *Life's Buffet*

*Mary Carter*

Forrest Gump said life is like a box of chocolates,  
but I think it's more like the buffet line at Luby's.  
You can see exactly what you're getting,  
but you still don't always know exactly what it is –  
can't tell by looking whether a sauce is sweet  
or hot, if the corn has too much salt or not enough,  
and certainly don't know if the meat loaf inclines  
to indigestion. After a while you learn some things –  
not to fill up on salads, to skip the brown gravy,  
which bread is too dry, and that you should always  
leave room for pie.

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## *Ode to Lovell Paul Phillips at West Ward School*

*1953-54*

*Judy Callarman*

Through pale green halls we marched for years.  
In sepia tones we sat still under austere gazes of  
Washington and Lincoln.

Wise and kind grandmothers, their gray hair knotted,  
taught us perfect upper- and lowercase handwriting,  
addition, subtraction, antics of Dick and Jane and Spot.  
We learned our lessons – all but Ray and Tommy,  
ably paddled every day by our somber  
one-armed principal, Mr. Midkiff.

Fifth grade dawned, part of seven years' drought.  
Swirling red dirt crept through school windows into ears,  
made teeth gritty.

The playground was bare ground, windswept mesquite,  
splintery see-saw.

Amid pervasive dust, a suddenly new principal appeared with  
bow tie, black wavy hair, bright eyes.

Mr. Holmes would teach us geography, wave his two arms  
and laugh.

Mrs. Phillips, her husband gone to war,  
would pass her time teaching us music.

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Music?

Mrs. Phillips was young. And pretty.

We did not know young teachers existed. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed,  
guilty, we hoped her husband would stay gone a while.

From dusty black and white and sepia we danced  
into bursting music and color,  
like Dorothy into Oz.

In song we proclaimed mighty Texas, blessed amber waves of  
grain,  
trampled grapes of wrath, sat by firelight under a million  
stars.

O dear Sorrento, we yearned for thee, bound away,  
longed to see the rolling river of Shenandoah.  
Swing and turn, waving scarves of red and green and blue and  
yellow  
burst on our sepia sight, from her heart to ours.

Did she yearn and long for Mr. Phillips, gone to war?  
He would return, we knew, and take her from us.  
We marched on to sixth grade, back to our loved, somber  
one-armed principal, Mr. Midkiff.

But now, the world's austerity wore bright swirling skirts  
and scarves of vermilion.  
Blowing red dirt was meaningless.  
She had armed us against sepia.

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## *a computer, dad*

*Carl Palmer*

my dad asks “What’s that contraption, son?”

a computer, dad

like going to the library  
only quicker  
we can stay right here

not a TV, a monitor  
watch what is typed  
view search results

it can’t see you, dad  
or hear you  
no need to whisper

okay, I’ll ask it  
rhode island red rooster  
enter and presto

see, wasn’t that quick  
oh really  
a hen

let’s try something else  
no need to whisper, dad

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tomorrow's lottery numbers  
no, it won't tell you that  
okay I guess you're right  
I'll turn it off

## *Me, My Father*

*Richard T. Rauch*

Spending time  
Now a hobby of mine  
Noticing how  
Old I'm growing  
Looking more  
In less subtle ways  
Like him  
Becoming more  
Like him  
Seeing more  
Of him  
In me  
Of me  
In him  
Seeing the future  
This bitter reflection  
This trick of time  
My Father  
Watching me  
Watching himself

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Growing old yet again  
Both of us  
Reliving the pathos  
The irony  
The mediocrity  
The regrets and shame  
The nostalgia  
Of second chances —  
  
Could this be immortality?

## *Ostrich*

*Rebecca Hatcher Travis*

frown lines like apricot pits  
deepen daily  
go away!

stare straight ahead  
rush by the ever-seeing oval mirror  
waiting inside the door

don't check your hair  
don't check your collar  
hurry by!

the mind's eye  
always  
prefers its own image

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## *The Dance Class*

*Carole Ann Moletti*

Months have passed since last August when I was toned and in top form, at least as top as you can be when what used to be freckles on your nose now speckle your chest. One week before a significant birthday I was trying my best to ignore, I took ballet class *en pointe*, dripping sweat in New York City humidity so oppressive the haze wrapped around me like a shroud. I toweled off and went home to pack my aching feet in ice.

One week later, the day before the birthday I pretended wasn't going to happen, a surfing instructor confirmed I was "goofy" before I grabbed my board and paddled into the swells. He was referring to the natural stance you take, either right or left foot forward, when you jump onto your board. I was thinking more of "crazy," imagining that not counting birthdays stops the passage of time, and the inevitable toll it takes on the body.

I've been an athlete and dancer since childhood. Reality drove me to abandon Olympic dreams and aspirations of being carried across the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, *en arabesque*, in the muscular arms of Mikhail Baryshnikov. I just wasn't good enough. A career in the health professions gave me the security, and income, a true Virgo requires.

So, on the cusp of the fall of my life, I danced to the music, defying reason and gravity, allowing a vision of what could have been to push the woman looking back at me in the mirror out of

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the way. I rode one wave on my knees but Johnny, the surfer boy, assured me it was a very respectable achievement for a first timer. I'd gotten my sense of balance and next time, I vowed to be up on my feet.

The birthday I ignored came and went, but time didn't stop. I limped into an orthopedist's office on crutches one crisp September day, my pain scale somewhere between appendicitis and labor, with a torn ligament in my right knee. Not from dancing or surfing. Like most things in life, it's the unexpected that gets you. I tripped over a rug, landed a graceful *jeté*, and twisted my aged limb just enough to render me immobile, in a Vicodan stupor, and full leg brace.

Three months of physical therapy later, I got the go-ahead to return to dancing, but to take it easy. But before I got my leotard and tights out of a bottom drawer came another wipeout. This time the pain was psychological, but no less incapacitating.

I squeezed in my annual mammogram between Christmas shopping and baking cookies. Just before New Year's, the letter informed me there was a "new finding" which "required additional imaging." Being a health professional, I know new isn't good when it comes to X-rays. And though the odds of it being benign were good, too many women I know who were far too young and healthy didn't beat them.

The seven-day wait seemed like seven years, during which time I had decided it would be a wig, not a turban, while on chemo. I'd spend more time with my husband and children so they would remember the good times. Of course, I'd quit my job and finish all my stories so everyone would recognize the genius after my death.

~§~

I sat with nine others, naked from the waist up, shivering in a white gown decorated with blue flowers, specially designed to

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tie in the front, allowing one breast at a time to be exposed, squashed, and twisted. The odds were that at least one of us would get bad news. Was it wrong for me to wish it was someone else?

The tech squeezed and contorted, a tight-lipped smile on her face. "I'm sorry, I know this hurts."

Just do it! I wanted to scream. "That's okay," I said and smiled back.

She took the films to the radiologist, told me to wait, and ordered breakfast.

The sonographic technician traced the offending breast in radial strokes, the machine clicked and whirred. How many of them are there? I thought, lying in the darkened room, with my name and future illuminated on a tiny screen.

"Does it hurt there?" she asked, seeing me grimace.

"It does now," I answered.

"I'm not supposed to tell you, but it looks good." Her smile was real. "I'll go get the radiologist."

Too many minutes passed during which time I shivered, but didn't feel cold. I studied the image on the screen, with no idea what I was looking at, still not daring to believe.

"Good news," the radiologist walked in and announced. "Just two simple cysts which don't need biopsies."

He talked for a while but I recall little more than his last words. "We'll see you in six months."

That will be just before my next birthday, I thought, remembering how good it felt in the summer of my life, when my body behaved the way it was supposed to and I could count on good genes and lifelong fitness.

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My midwinter lips chapped, cuticles cracked and bleeding from the cold, I don my leotards and walk into adult ballet class

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at the midtown Manhattan studio. The room is filled with women and men too old (or not good enough) to make it in the dance world. Professional dancers from the City's best companies teach there, allowing us to dream to live piano accompaniment.

I pull on leg warmers to keep my muscles limber. Black power stretch tights hide the varicose veins. I flex and extend my feet, coaxing them to curve correctly despite an orthotic in my left slipper to keep pressure off an old stress fracture. Dancing, particularly on *pointe*, isn't kind to aging ballerinas, even the ones who have earned the right to call themselves that.

All the regulars are there. Most are forty-somethings, or older, hair pulled up into buns frosted with gray. The younger and ponytailed, no doubt find comfort in the fact that youth gives them an advantage they don't have when competing with wrinkle-free peers. The men's tights reveal sagging behinds and the precise orientation of their frontal anatomy. My sheer black skirt provides no more than an illusion of a flat tummy and cellulite free thighs. This is a group who has long since passed the stage of caring what-the-hell anyone else thinks.

I'm not the only one who has escaped from the riptides and undertow. The anorexic with Goth hair, piercings, and tattoos no longer looks like a skeleton, but keeps glancing in the mirror at what she must think is a huge butt.

A blonde beauty, my age, still wears a slinky, backless leotard with no skirt. As she exercises her feet and stretches, I notice worry lines carved deeply into the face that last summer, held up a confident, smiling chin while she danced. She must have donated ten pounds and twenty years to the anorexic; her skin looks dry and leathery, dotted with bruises and Band-Aids over venipuncture sites. I feel a pang of guilt and suspect she was one those who didn't get good news. I want to hug her, but she's not here for a pity party. The instructor prances in on the

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balls of her feet and does *une chasse* around the studio, greeting the class.

“Carole, how nice to see you back.”

I explain my absence, leaving out a lot of details.

“Take it easy, no jumping or twisting,” she says, moving on.

She gestures to the pianist and he begins to play. We do our *barre* routine and she corrects body position, adjusts an arm here, tips a chin up there, praising our efforts. The blonde struggles to hold her balance.

“Don’t push yourself,” our teacher whispers, stroking a battered arm.

“Very nice body position. Beautiful feet. Show the rest of the class how this is supposed to look.”

The anorexic smiles with pride and demonstrates an exquisite *combré* that only a younger body can achieve.

“Gentlemen, your flexibility is increasing.”

“Carole, lead the group across the floor. You know the combination. Five, six, seven, eight.”

Can I do it? I think. It’s been months. I know the steps but my brain doesn’t communicate with the feet. Try to keep up and don’t fall down.

“Thank you all for your time and effort.” The instructor ends the class with reverence.

We bow to her and to the pianist, who, in his own musical rapture, seems oblivious to our struggles. We rush back into the freezing headwind of real life.

I suppress thoughts of what the next year will bring. Odds are I’ll take *pointe* class again, after my muscles have remembered what they’re supposed to do. Next August, I have a date with surfer Johnny on Nauset Beach. I’ll ride the waves, still goofy, but standing firm on my feet.

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## *Great Aunt Pearl*

*Becky Haigler*

Unlike the oyster,  
which covers intrusion  
with soothing layers  
to create a gem,  
since childhood  
she has added offense  
to irritation, complaint  
to grief, to form a knot,  
accreted misery, polished  
with self-righteousness.

## *Bossa Nova Hand Dance*

*Kenneth Pobo*

Late that summer we swayed  
to Connie Francis singing  
“Bossa Nova Hand Dance,”  
got married. Now we’re  
divorced

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amicably. You met a tree  
surgeon and I met a realtor.  
I wonder do you and your  
lover hand dance? Do you  
dance at all? Are you

like me and my lover, our  
dancing days done, thousands  
of pots and pans before us  
'til we get ample  
paid-in-advance plots?

Should we have stayed  
together? We can't revive  
the bossa nova.

My joints are bad. Often

in bed with the realtor  
I see you as a samba  
at the edge of my life. You  
move like hibiscus. I slip  
into sleep thinking of flowers  
falling.

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## *Several Silent Sorrys* *(To Elaine)*

*Jim Wilson*

I was stunned by the announcement of your death.  
Poor guy said it like he was reading the news  
And my startled cry-look confused him.  
He had not even used your name. Just, we went to  
Kenny Shaver's wife's funeral last Saturday in Tyler.

Magic mental time travel in an instant blur back to 1969  
To the crystal clear image of a little skinny college girl  
With ear short poofy blond hair who really loved me —  
I can still see it in your eyes that last time I walked away.

Back to me, a lonesome soon to be ex-teenager,  
Who offered you frightened love and then jerked it away  
Like teasing a sweet baby kitten with a feather pull toy.

Back to a monumental fork in my life's road.  
The one path chosen and thirty years traveled.  
The other shrouded forever in the impenetrable mortal mist  
Of what we might have been if I had not lost my nerve.

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## *China Guilt*

*Lynn Pinkerton*

The family china. I've moved it across Texas five times...unopened. The over-sized boxes sit covered in dust in a lonely corner of my hobbit-hole storage area. It hasn't seen natural light in over twenty-five years. It's hibernating there, waiting to be resurrected to finer glory days.

In the hierarchy of our family tree, I am ranked the first grandchild on both sides of the family. This distinctive positioning is the sole reason that I am now in possession of the family china. By some quirk of fate, both of my grandmothers had the same china pattern. When they died, the aunts called a summit and decided that as the first grandchild, the china from both grandmothers should pass to me. My birth order bequeathed me 24 place settings of rose-rimmed china, assorted serving platters, cups, saucers and of course, the often-passed gravy bowl.

Although comfortable, neither set of grandparents came from money. Extra cash was spent on new overalls or roast for Sunday dinner. Fine china was a prized extravagance – something proudly displayed in shiny glass cabinets and reverently reserved for the most special of holidays.

I have tried hard to conjure up the proper respect for this heirloom gift. Throughout my childhood our large, close-knit family gathered around this china for traditional holidays and enthusiastically relished the bounty from both grandmothers'

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kitchens. These rose-strewn, delicate dishes cradled roast, turkey, ham, cranberries, pickled peaches, last summer's black-eyed peas, marshmallow-topped baked sweet potatoes, cream gravy, fresh ambrosia, pineapple-upside-down cake, hot homemade rolls and hotter coffee. The same china has been a silent collaborator in the women's after-dinner laughter and family gossip while washing dishes. I cherish each of these family get-togethers, but cannot summon up a flicker of interest in the china.

With every good intention, over the years I have periodically attempted to bring the china into my life. I've tried hard to think of twenty-four people I know who would sit down to a formal dinner served on china. Then I would scale back and think I could dig out just a couple of place settings for a special intimate dinner. Or maybe a creative silk flower arrangement for the gravy bowl. At the very least I could buy a fine glass-fronted cabinet and display it for the viewing pleasure of my grandmothers' ghosts.

With deep apologies to Honey and Mama Pink, my two grannies who started it all, my attempts at befriending the china are, for the most part, a failed concept. I live life as a single woman and have no children. There are no pre-destined china heirs in my current lineage. Repeated rummaging around in my mind for other family members to tag "Caretaker of the Family China" comes up empty. Most of them eat take-out dinners in front of the television and would grow weak at the thought of washing all of those dishes by hand.

Although certainly appreciative of the finer, formal side of life, I lead a mostly laid-back lifestyle. My idea of a fun get-together is throwing chicken on a backyard grill and using paper plates from Wal-Mart. I'm more comfortable in bare feet than expensive shoes and prefer casual conversation with friends on

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my patio, drinking wine from plastic goblets. Try as I might, I can't wrangle a reasonable way to adapt fine china to my life.

China guilt periodically nips at my heels. I turn and stare it back down into submission. The china may not be on proper display, but interspersed throughout my home are old family photos and cherished mementos and keepsakes. Tender memories of relatives rest in my heart and I gratefully honor the broad path they have cut for me. Only the china sits neglected and not properly loved.

For now, dozens of tiny pink roses still bloom inside the dark, dusty boxes. Odds are that when kinfolks come to pack up after I'm gone, someone will claim it, bypass the Goodwill Store and haul the cumbersome family china home. Maybe to a fine display case. Maybe for special dinners. Or maybe just to stash away in a forgotten, sometimes guilty corner as an enduring reminder of the wide wake left by those who traveled the waters before them.

## *Room for Improvement*

*Becky Chakov*

Sometimes I reach unheralded heights  
And grandly cope in a crisis.  
Too soon I revert to my feet of clay  
And my usual quota of vices.

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## *Chimera*

*Sharon Mooney*

Someday, perhaps,  
I'll quit my job,  
escape the bosses  
breathing fire,  
plaguing me with  
deadlines, dull demands.  
I'll pick up paper, pens,  
paint brushes, move  
to France, where I will  
sit for countless hours  
contemplating flowers,  
write a poem or two,  
paint girls in blue  
with yellow parasols,  
drink wine, eat bread  
and cheese, give in  
to foolish fantasies,  
embrace the Seine,  
escape the sane,  
the sensible, my small,  
contracted world,  
someday, perhaps

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