

## Life in the balance

There's a moment between falling and flying  
Like a bird with its feet on the edge of its nest  
Suspended for an instant between living and dying  
Balancing in the breeze with its wings outstretched

Like a dancer en pointe, or a dog with three legs

Or a man on a bicycle high on a wire

A sloop in a gale, or a stack of beer kegs

A waitress with a tray full of fish from the fryer

Generations of children who leap atop walls

A bright spinning top as it wobbles and falls

A spoon on a nose or two plates on two sticks

A fork holding peas are good balancing tricks

A rock as it rests on the top of a cliff

The snow as it clings to a sloping roof's edge

A car as it's hoisted above on a lift

A man as he shakes peering down from a ledge

We teeter and totter, we climb to the heights

Suspended aloft, hear the gasp from the crowd

Either up or straight down, between left and our right

Lean one inch or another, it's the dirt of the clouds

Which is better, to plant both our feet on the ground

Or be suspended aloft between silence and sound

The defying of gravity cuts like a knife

Between falling and flying, we balance for life

Nancy Dickerson

## The Cyclist

### Tricycle

How could I fall?  
You were supposed to keep me up  
And train me to stand on my own two feet  
But you let me fall and I'm down

Your big wheel is spinning while you're  
On your side but your streamers are  
Still sparkling and blowing in the wind.  
You lied and now I understand

Better to push you into the garage  
Behind the flower pots where you belong.  
Next year I will go back to walking  
And you will stay shiny back there.

### Bicycle

I never had a bicycle before  
The kind that has two wheels,  
My transport was a bit a mess  
It was precarious, unreal.

Cuz two wheels sure do even it out,  
The load one has to carry,  
The front wheel turns you right or left,  
The back is steady, wary.

So let's take turns which wheel we are  
It doesn't matter to me  
Cuz I never had a bicycle before,  
Two wheels, stability.

### Unicycle

A blessing or a curse?  
Just one wheel to maintain,  
To inflate when flattened,  
Just one.

Be cautious of sharp objects  
That may puncture its skin,  
Keeping upright, stay still,  
Stay upright, it's not easy.

Once you're up you must stay steady,  
Your arms, they're sails,  
Free and flailing, blowing  
This way and that.

Stay up, you have no choice my friend,  
There's no lifeboat anywhere in sight.

Laurie Gosse

## Disequilibrium

Its absence slows down to a crawl,  
Life-sustaining, vital contraction and sprawl.  
Peace on earth, rest in peace, live in peace, we recite.  
Denying our natural urge to incite,  
Disequilibrium.  
Were we left to live out our own status quo,  
And without alteration stay in our hole,  
In one generation our race would die out,  
Like a landlocked, floundering trout in a drought.  
But, instead, it's our nature to get up and move.  
Agitate, postulate, jump from the groove.  
We wander the globe like an invasive species.  
Crashing the delicate balance to pieces.  
Better angels, we hope, will in the ruckus.  
Bend the arc of our craving for change into justice.  
Demolishing dogma that leaves us benighted,  
Peeling the scales from our eyes, newly-sighted,  
To bring a new balance, preparing the way,  
For the next generation to knock it away.

Jim Hopkins

## RISKY BUSINESS

The old man shuffles  
Leaning on his wooden cane  
Small bag of groceries  
In his other hand  
Wind poking at his back  
A few more yards  
The aging wooden steps  
Are slick with snow  
Wrought iron rail  
Dripping icicles  
Inside, the landing's refuge  
Before the flight of stairs  
Daunting as Mt. Everest  
Since the second stroke  
Cerotic liver  
Failing kidneys  
Diabetes  
Beyond the summit door  
The TV waits, an old PC  
Two portly cats  
An Unsafe habitat  
His doctor says  
But one he stays in  
Out of choice  
Familiar ground  
Worth the risk  
In a shrinking  
Out of balance world  
He's no longer able  
To predict

Frank Kelly

## Balance

Sunlight streams through the classroom,  
Warm and vibrating with anticipation  
As recess time draws near.

The shrill sound of the bell, and  
Sister Eugenia marshals the troops  
For the long march to the playground.

Once through the double doors  
Bedlam ensues.  
A 7-year-old stampede for freedom.

Decisions are made with alacrity  
Jungle gym, swings,  
Jump rope, slide.

Mary Ellen and I head for the teeter totter,  
Peeling green paint adorns both seats  
Hopping on, we pray for no splinters.

Clasping the red handles,  
We hold on tight  
For a launch heavenward.

What joy the first time we discover  
That we are each other's  
Perfect counterweight.

Cecile Swift Lippitt

## BALANCING ACT

I've gone out on a limb  
taking a chance.  
Like standing tall in a boat  
legs wide in stance.  
Lean one way or t'other - then  
into the expanse!

So if I lose my balance  
while on that limb,  
Will I fall in the water,  
be forced to swim?  
Or can I step to the end,  
avoid the brim?

Should I just avoid the limb  
altogether?  
Avoid the foolhardy way,  
find fair weather?  
No! Then the fun and rewards  
lose their tether.

'Tis better to take that chance -  
stand on one foot.  
If I lose my balance, well . . .  
no pussyfoot.  
My fearless boldness won't be  
wasted output.

Whether limb, boat, fall or stand,  
watch your balance.  
Whatever you choose to do,  
use your talents.  
Not timid, but with valor,  
get in the dance!

John E. Lutz

## *“All for Love”*

*If, when you swing me up in your embrace  
And lift me swiftly o'er the fence, I find  
A limb to steady me, do not debase  
My love; it is in fear I am unkind.  
And though I set my fleet out on the sea  
To battle Roman foes at Actium,  
And spikes of brass strike at my side—I flee  
With heart unfurled, and once again succumb,  
Have faith, for in my time, I'll brave the worst  
In wretched wars, no matter what the cost.  
The apple blossom in my heart will burst  
Without anticipation of the frost.*

*You need but put me to the final test,  
And I will find your arms, and there will rest.*

*Beth MacRae*

\*John Dryden knew—hanging too long in the balance is antipathetic to love.

## Balance

Contemplating “balance”,  
My head begins to spin,  
My mind gets out-of-balance!  
Where do I begin?

How many ways does balance  
Affect your life and mine?  
Without it we’d not stand upright  
Or walk the yellow line!

Tightrope walkers, teeter-totters,  
Gymnasts on trapeze,  
Bicyclists and ballet dancers  
Balancing with ease!

However does our planet earth  
Stay tilted so in space?  
Solar pull plus headlong speed  
Must balance it in place.

The balance of our ruling power  
Is kept by branches three;  
The balance of commercial trade  
Would mean stability!

Nature has a balance  
Your diet has one too.  
Your checkbook and your mental health  
They’re balancing for you?

Yoga teachers balance well  
Lest tree pose cause a fall.  
A golfer aims his stroke with care,  
The seal can nose its ball.

Gymnasts use the balance beam,  
mechanics balance tires;  
Kiddies love the see saw,  
Tight-ropists walk on wires!

Balancing is beautiful -  
Truly an amazing state.  
Balance makes our world go ‘round -  
Un-balancing we hate.

- Marian Strang

## High-Wire Walkers of 1904

Having aged, my sense of balance has declined.  
Not as steady on my feet I find.  
A circus performer back in the day,  
I walked the tightrope to earn my pay.  
So agile, in sequins, in my prime;  
The ring master called my act "sublime."  
One foot placed slowly before the other.  
Learned the act from my beloved mother.  
"You must find balance in life," she would say.  
"If you hope to survive the Rope of Life each day.  
Blondin crossed Niagara Gorge on a wire.  
Newspapers said so; I am no liar.  
Stopped midway. Cooked a midday meal with mirth.  
One tasty omelet 'tween Heaven and Earth.  
Great Spelterini, blindfolded like Lady Justice,  
Held a pole with scales; caused quite a ruckus."  
  
So I taught my children these acts for Sautelle,  
And we pleased ol' Sig. Pleased him exceedingly well.  
We toured by rail and performed under Sig's tent  
In warm weather, night and day. Then, off we went  
To winter in Homer and get the kids schoolin'.  
The teachers on the Green put up with no foolin'.  
Taught them balance 'tween body and mind.  
Taught them grit and yet how to be kind.

Quoted from Scripture at the break of each morn:  
"A season to laugh and a time to mourn."  
To have faith in the Unseen and the Seen  
To watch for the Tempter with vision so keen,  
To toe the line and through evil tread.  
'One miss-step and your soul is dead.'  
In an eight-sided house, clowns watched us train,  
Balancing the body and using the brain.  
  
Of Sig Sautelle's Circus you surely must know  
How my family walked wires in every show.  
Made people gasp and applaud with glee  
Then spiraled down to the floor to see  
Standing ovations and smiles galore  
From folks who paid twenty-five cents at the door  
For some moments of pleasure to offset their pains,  
To balance humdrum with "death-defyin' games."  
  
Are we not tightrope walkers caught in Life's snare,  
Making the transition from Here to Where?  
Checking our rigging for anything nefarious  
Before making that journey oh so precarious.  
Pulled by opposites as we make our way,  
  
Seeking equilibrium, feeling the sway,  
Keeping our balance like folks from before,  
Like high-wire walkers of Nineteen Ought Four?

Martin A. Sweeney

## Maria's Walk

Only the roaring of the water fills my ears. The effect is distraction -- and it's welcome. If all I think about is the rush of the sapphire river, and the foamy swirl of the rapids, I won't think about the walk. I won't think about my feet balancing on the cold, wet steel. I won't think about falling.

As I stand at the start of the cable, taught and straight above the edge of the Niagara Gorge, I bend my toes in and out a few times -- three times, to be precise. I was a tender child of three when I first began my stunts, and the number has stubbornly lodged itself in my memory. I would balance on my father's hands as he rode around the circus ring on his white mare, delighting the crowds in our native Italy .

He would smile at the spectators as the horse galloped in circles, his bright grin balanced by the steely determination in his eyes. I never felt fear then, never knew enough to. To me, I was flying and my senses were on fire; the mare, my father, and I were the only things that mattered.

"Maria! Are you ready?"

I shake off the reverie of Italy and look to the side, where my manager and friend Joseph stands tensely on the rocky precipice. His tweed suit is flecked with mist from the falls, and he holds out my bar with an imploring look.

I take it gratefully, my companion in this balancing act. Worn and wooden, it has steadied me before, across rivers in Europe. I give Joseph a nod, and he flashes me a smile. It reminds me of my father's -- bright on the outside, but full of flint on the inside.

"Smile, Maria, smile!" He gestures to his face as I pull my mouth up.

This is not just a challenge I have given myself; it's a performance.

I space my hands apart on the bar so that they fall into their familiar groves. It is a beautiful counterweight. One must balance reliance on the bar with steadiness of the feet, otherwise nothing can happen.

A few cheers and catcalls from the masses on the bridge race by my ears, disappearing quickly below the rumbles of the water.

They might want the crossing to begin, but it's up to me.

*Equilibrio*, I think to myself as I check that my boots are tied tightly. The fearlessness of childhood -- the wisdom of womanhood. The strength of the body -- the agility of the mind. Showmanship for the people - - courage for myself.

I allow myself one look below before I slide a green-shod foot out onto the cable. It's far, much farther than I had even imagined when I had first heard of the *mozzafiato* Niagara.

Then I see that the bright blue skies are perfectly mirrored by the pool of turquoise below me.

I smile, and walk forward.

Meghan Aagaard

## A Minor Imbalance

It was the kind of night that makes you wonder about ghosts. The wind grumbled through the trees and leaves swayed in its blustery moans. It was not yet six, but a thick brocade of clouds made it feel pitch black. The ground had had its fill of rain and water overflowed flower beds and lawns. Mist beaded on the eyelashes and hair of those unlucky enough to be out. Ellen wiped the drizzle from her rimless glasses and swore under her breath. Why hadn't she taken up Sue on her offer for a ride home?

*You always were too stubborn for your own good.*

Even after a year, Ellen could still see David's teasing smile, the corners turned down in mock consternation. She shivered and pulled her raincoat close. The light changed in the reflective puddles that cluttered the sidewalk and she crossed the street, dragging her right leg. It hurt, but it always bothered her in this weather. Her left leg pulled ahead, but she slowed it to conceal her limp, an old habit. A harsh breeze rattled through a nearby bush, making her jump. She chided herself for being so skittish, but the wailing wind made her think of her dream. She'd been having it more often since David died. In it, she was freckled and pig-tailed, back in the doctor's office after the accident.

"She'll have a minor imbalance in her walk once the leg heals. Nothing serious. She's not going to be a track star, but she'll be fine." The doctor laughed. He was an older man with a round face and too much hair. Ellen sat on the exam table, cheeks stinging with shame. Her parents chuckled uneasily. Their laughter mixed with the doctors' and grew louder until it morphed into the howl of the ambulance. Ellen tried to cover her ears but the noise only intensified. And then she was falling again. Falling, falling, falling forever. Her sister Susan, still on the roof, looked down, her mouth a perfect "O" of surprise. When the screams started, David would gently shake her awake. Even after thirty years, he still recited the same calming words.

*You are safe. You are whole. You are here.*

"Ellen?" The memory dissolved into Leslie Elliott, umbrella in hand.

"Nasty weather we're having, isn't it?"

Ellen plastered on a smile. "Yes, hoping to get home before getting soaked," she tried to sound cheerful.

"Hey, why don't you come to dinner tonight! Some of the ladies from church are each making a different soup, a sort of potluck."

At one time Ellen would have relished the invitation, but now she couldn't muster the effort. Everyone else seemed to know when it was time to put grief away, but no one had bothered to clue her in.

"Sounds lovely, but I don't think I'll make it."

"If you change your mind, be at my place at 7:30!" Leslie called after her.

Ellen shuffled past her friend and tossed a thank you over her shoulder. Now the rain turned sideways and the darkness thickened. There just weren't enough street lights. Five years ago David started a petition to add more to their neighborhood. It hadn't gained any traction, but he was undeterred. She'd always loved his confidence. Even at twenty, when they'd met, he'd seemed self-assured and unbothered by others' opinions. She'd dated before David, but he wasn't like the others. He never treated her differently because of her leg. Didn't try to do things for her that she was perfectly capable of doing herself. Rather, he brought out a certain strength in her.

Her hair, always pinned in a bun at the nape of her neck, was rapidly coming undone in the wind. Loose strands plastered themselves to her face. Somewhere behind her, a branch snapped. Then another. She quickened her pace and peeked behind her, but her rain flecked glasses made seeing anything impossible.

Another branch popped behind her, accompanied by a whoosh of wind. Or was it laughter? She scoffed at ghost stories, but the rain now chilled her in more ways than one. Three more quick cracks fanned her fear. Her walk became a shuffling gait. She looked back again and gasped to see a lone figure approaching. With her head turned, she missed the wet branch that stretched across the path. Stumbling, she lost her balance and fell sideways into the muddy grass with a slurping thud. Frantically, she whirled around. Standing over her, fear etched across his face, was a teenage boy.

"Are you alright?"

Ellen blinked hard. There was nothing there. Just a kid walking home. And he probably thought he needed to call her an ambulance. Her face reddened.

Another memory of David materialized. A sudden downpour during a picnic had them racing home. She'd slipped in a puddle and was furious about ruining a new dress.

*Don't be upset. People pay thousands for this treatment!* He flopped down with her, rubbing glossy mud on his cheeks until she rolled her eyes and pushed herself out of the puddle. He always was a bit ridiculous.

Then the memory was gone. Now, splayed in the muddy grass, Ellen laughed. She laughed at the memory of David sloshing in the mud and the mess they'd made getting home. She laughed at how she'd frightened this poor boy as much as he frightened her. She laughed at her own stubbornness. She laughed until tears streamed down her face and mingled with the rain. She hadn't laughed in such a long time.

"Um...M'am?"

She looked back at the boy and stifled more laughter. "Thank you. I'm fine."

Relief flooded his features. He nodded and hastily crossed the street. Ellen pushed the curtain of wet hair out of her face. Suddenly she was starving. She should get cleaned up and head over to Leslie's. The thought surprised her but it wasn't unwelcome, like a long lost friend come home unexpectedly.

Alexandria Faulkenbury

## The House Tree

One day a woman woke up and went into her kitchen, exhausted from insomnia, awake but still longing for a good night's sleep. It took several seconds before she noticed that a tree had grown up through the floor and out through the roof of her house. She had not noticed a tree there before. Perhaps it had grown there during the summer? Or during the night? Graceful branches reached along the wall and out the windows. The woman felt rather pleased. She liked trees.

The woman made herself a cup of coffee and sat down at her small kitchen table under the shelter of the tree. This tree in her kitchen reminded her of when she was a child, and there had been a tree house in the field by her grandparents' home. She'd loved that tree house and wanted to be there all the time. She'd loved looking out through the branches on the neighborhood world.

Quietly the woman told the tree it was very welcome in her kitchen, and because she was curious, she asked how it got there. The tree was happy to be there with the woman, but was not in the mood to talk, and so said nothing. The woman remembered the tall, generous tree that had held her childhood tree house in its arms. She understood. She nodded and gently patted the rough bark with her smooth hand.

Time went by. The tree told the woman interesting stories from its weathered, concentric past. The woman sang songs she knew and read poems she found about trees. The tree invited small, throaty song birds into its branches. The woman gave up eating eggs, not wanting to offend her guests. The tree acknowledged her courtesy and gave her advice about her insomnia. *Listen*, was the advice, *really listen*.

More time passed and the woman noticed that the bark of the tree looked sick. It was wet and sad-looking. The woman wrapped the tree trunk with soft towels. She sang to the tree. But nothing helped. Then she heard a knock at her door. It was a child wearing jeans and a t-shirt that read "Love your mother," in cursive against a blue green image of Earth. The child was carrying a toolbox and smiling a polite smile.

The child examined the tree carefully and explained to the woman that the tree needed more fresh air. The woman promised to leave all the windows open. It wasn't that chilly and the woman remembered her favorite flannel shirt from a thrift store. She just slipped it on when the open windows made the kitchen cool.

Also, the child said, the tree was lonely. The child flung open the tool box. A cloud of butterflies filled the kitchen and landed on the branches and limbs and leaves. The child closed the tool box and added a few more thoughts. Let the tree cry when it's sad, the child said, and let the tree laugh and lift its limbs when it's happy. Then the child said goodbye.

The woman asked a friend to make a larger opening in the roof so the tree could continue growing and fresh air could circulate in pathways more like the wind. The tree looked upward and grew happy and strong. The woman slept well and was feeling much more energized. To celebrate, she sat down at her computer and wrote a book about trees that live in houses and houses that live in trees. The woman and the tree lived happily ever after.

Lynn Olcott