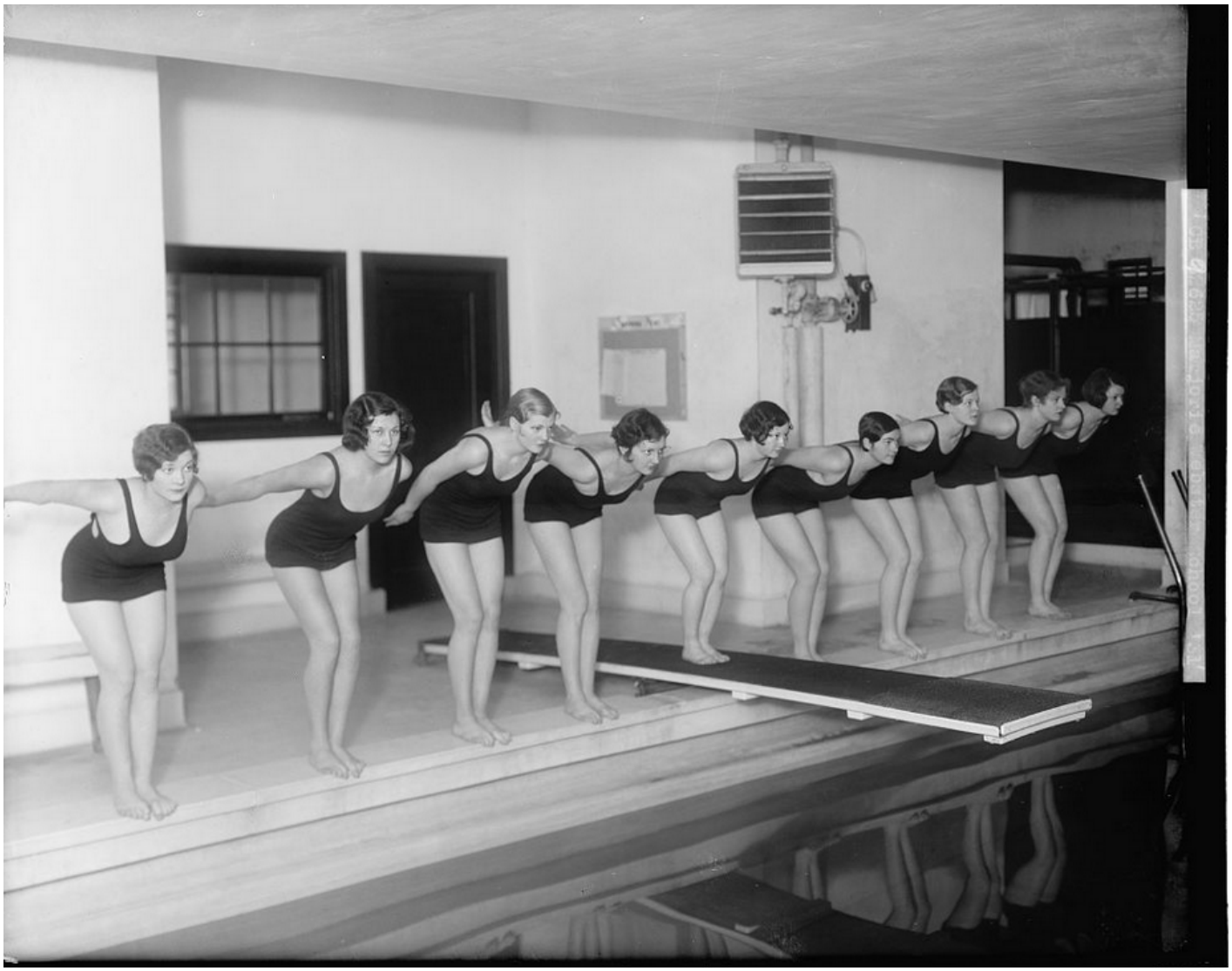
Liquid Ballerina [1]

October 7, 2015 Flash Nonfiction [2]
Family Stories [3]

Flash Nonfiction by Paige Nichols

The Margarets Who Might Have Been



Yes, Mother, my mommy, my own, it was me. I stole the picture. The one of you, young and sultry, full in your prime, full of possibility like that name of yours, oh you Margaret Maggie Meg Peg Gretta Mamie Madge.

How bold of you to pull your hair back so tightly, showing off that great breadbox of a forehead, letting everyone know straight up that *you* (Margie Daisy Mags) were a girl of high intelligence. A girl who would brook no nonsense. An Oklahoma College for Girls girl—the first in your family to earn a degree. And where did that bowlful of brains land you?

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Smack dab in the middle of Midwestern Motherhood with no one but four crumb-crusted kids to hear you roar.

But in the picture, your eyebrows are arched, one slightly raised, framing your eyes; your gaze: direct. What were you looking at? Did you see us calling to you from a decade down the road? Or were the paths not taken still in sight that day? You went to *Africa* for Pete's sake! And traveled Europe with your bass viol, soothing sad sacks rescued from communism with the Old Soft Shoe (and nothing else will do). Voice of America would have been lucky to have you, had it had you, had you not had us, your own private musical quartet.

Molly! Midge! Maisie! Mumsie! Who was that girl with the sharp nose? You taught us to swim without holding ours. Those early mornings shivering at the mean edge of the public pool were worth it for the moment when you'd slide into the deep end, lie perfectly still on your back, tracing figure eights with your hands until—POW!—you would shoot one leg straight up to the sky and then the other as you arched backward, spinning stiffly pointed toes as you sank straight down, a liquid ballerina.

How we loved it, too, when later at home you'd clear the cedar chest of its blue glass and lace doilies and dig deep to retrieve the spangled suit from your college days.

Your mouth is relaxed, your lips parted, showing just a glimmer of tooth. No sign of the tightness around your lips to come. But what a mouth you still have! Mom, Grandma, Greatma, you with your "Cursing signifies a lack of linguistic creativity." You with your "My foot!" and "I'll be hornswoggled!"

I took the picture from the display at your eightieth birthday party. When I got home, I propped it on the sideboard, the one with a mirror in my dining room. I keep forgetting it's there, but every once in awhile, I turn to look in the mirror and smooth my hair back from my own broad forehead. I get a start when I see you—me in you, not-you in me—and I wonder at the Margarets who might have been, who stepped aside so that we could have you, all of you, all to ourselves, our one and only mother.

Art Information

- "Marjorie Webster School, Swimmers" from the Harris & Ewing Collection; courtesy of U.S Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.



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