dances. "I feel like I've had it almost taken away so many times that I'm just astounded with the fact that I'm still able to keep going," she says.

Walker's path has been uncertain, and unusual for a professional dancer. A native of New York City, she studied at American Ballet Theatre's elite Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School as a teenager. Her senior year of high school—even after she'd been accepted to Harvard—was spent attending massive cattle-call auditions for professional companies. Just when she was about to give up, she spotted a notice for Los Angeles Ballet, a new company with impressively pedigreed artistic directors. The audition happened on a rainy day, she remembers; her mother encouraged her to go. "She said I'd regret it if I didn't. I was sewing pointe shoes in the car." A week later, she got the call.

Walker deferred college and headed west. Both city and company proved to be good fits, but an experimental summer-school stint in Cambridge in 2007 made Walker fall in love with Harvard, too. She decided to put her career on hold. While earning her degree in the history of art and architecture, she squeezed in classes at José Mateo Ballet Theatre in Harvard Square and kept up a heavy involvement in the Harvard Ballet Company, even though she was plagued by a ligament she'd torn in her foot back in her JKO School days. Though she always felt the pull of ballet, she says, "I wasn't sure if it was a possibility for me. I wasn't sure if my body was going to be able to handle it."

In her junior spring, mostly healed, she took a leave to dance a two-month contract with Los Angeles Ballet. After graduation she endured yet another cattle-call audition before being taken back into the company full time. During her second season, in class on Valentine's Day 2012, disaster struck. "I was doing soutenus, the simplest step you could do," she says, of a turn performed by extending one leg and bringing the other to meet it, "and somehow my foot slipped, and all my weight was on it in a twisted way over the pointe shoe, and I felt it go." She had torn the same ligament as before, this time severely enough to require surgery. For four months, she couldn't put any weight on the foot. Her recovery was grueling: "I had to teach myself to dance again, basically," she says. "That was a really, really low point for me."

Even for the luckiest dancers, careers are relatively fleeting; the fragility of the body, pushed to extremes, is part of ballet's allure and its heartbreak. As the curtain rose for the following year's *Nutcracker*, Walker found herself tearing up, overwhelmed. "I wasn't sure it was going to happen," she says.

Now in her sixth season with Los Angeles Ballet, Walker has danced a wide range of roles; her favorites include the Dark Angel in Balanchine's *Serenade*, Desdemona in Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*, and Arabian in *The Nutcracker*. She has also avoided major injury since her surgery, although, at 28, she has begun considering what she will do after she retires. She used to think she would seek out an entirely distinct second career, but now she is increasingly intrigued by the prospect of contributing to the survival of American ballet. "The longer I'm in this world, the more I realize what a special thing ballet is and how much it's struggling," she says. "The business model is not ideal. It's just so hard for these incredible companies to keep going. I'd love

OPEN BOOK

Guilt-Free Childbirth

Amy Tuteur '80, an obstetrician-turned-writer and mother of four, is the self-proclaimed "Enemy Number One of the Natural Parenting Industry," a spirited combatant in the childbirth wars. In *Push Back: Guilt in the Age of Natural Parenting* (Dey St./HarperCollins, $26.99), she enters the fray with zest. From the introduction:

ISTOCK IMAGES

No woman should ever feel guilty about the choices she makes regarding childbirth, breastfeeding, or the manner in which she cares for her baby. Surprised? Unfortunately we live in a society where these fundamental aspects of a woman's life are now an arena where judgment, second-guessing, and guilt reign supreme. It is no longer enough to give birth to a healthy baby and to care for that baby, providing food, warmth, and tenderness. Now all of these acts must be done, in many circles, in ways decreed "correct" by the natural parenting industry.

Where did this industry that dictates the behaviors of millions of women come from?

Surprisingly, the currently popular philosophies of natural childbirth, lactivism, and attachment parenting are based on nothing more than the personal beliefs of a few individuals, most of them men. To my mind, though, the most damaging aspect of this paradigm is that the judgment and guilt surrounding childbirth and child care are heaped upon women most often by other women.…

Initially I was simply bewildered by the ways in which my patients tormented themselves. After delivering a beautiful healthy baby to a joyous healthy mother, I would visit her the next day in the hospital and find her tearful over her "failure." Instead of enjoying the miracle of her new child, she would be berating herself that she had "given in" and gotten an epidural for pain relief. Or perhaps she would have concluded that her C-section reflected the fact that her body was "broken." There was a myriad of if-onlys. If only she hadn't agreed to the postterm induction; if only she had trusted birth more. Sometimes I wondered if the process of birth was more important than the baby itself.

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746