

The Swing

by Annette Ferran

The swing starts from an upper branch of a tall, slender, sturdy tree whose ascent has not been made much easier by the ladder propped against it, and it plummets down the gully, barely brushing the undergrowth, then rushes through a narrow path and between two dangerous and immobile trees, and comes to a precarious stop in a small clearing almost invisible from the starting perch. If you're too heavy, you run the risk of crashing into the tree to which the other end of the cable is tied, and if you anticipate this accident, you have to twist around in the swing while rushing plummeting down this green gully so that you can catch the tree with your outstretched feet, risking the further accident of jamming your stiff legs into their sockets. Then there's the descent from the swing itself as it drifts to a halt, done most gracefully and impressively by a backward flip, but most awkwardly and surely by the prosaic leap forward off the seat into a heap on the ground, because the swing is high enough that your feet don't touch. In fact, your head won't touch either if you're short enough and choose to flip upside down while still traveling the length of the gully, which is a frighteningly enjoyable trip, with the gray trunks whizzing by, their roots firmly implanted in a green grassy sky.

The swing is a test of bravery. We bounce through the fields in the back of a big dirty pick-up to get there, and pull red sumac bunches that look like tiny dyed Christmas trees of the bushes to suck on the way. They don't taste very good and my cousin warns us from his vast background of woods wisdom that if you pluck from the wrong bush and suck on the wrong hairy bunches, you could be eating poison sumac instead. But that's a test, too. No one knows how to tell the difference; it's like Russian roulette with vegetation.

If you go first on the swing, you don't have to watch the others make their trips down and experience vicarious stomach-flipping and simultaneous worry that when your turn comes you won't be up to the task. But if you go first, you have to think of the others watching you and rating your performance, and also worry that something has maybe happened to the cable since the last time you made the trip back here and that instead of plummeting to your victory in the little clearing, you'll plummet straight to your death.

I'm a girl, so I often go first even if I don't want to. My cousins and brother were raised right. I've never seen another girl go down on this swing, never seen anyone as small and skinny as I am shimmy up that tree and balance on the branch on the swing seat, never anybody else's pigtails graze the leaves and grasses on the path that becomes the sky when you turn upside down.

It is a test. The heights, the drops, the speed, the insubstantial perch and the looming black bark of the anchor tree become no less significant with every trip. Your legs wobble finally from anxiety and from having to run, pulling the swing back to the cousin or brother waiting impatiently in the starting tree. Like

climbing the hay bales in the barn or riding a trail bike or water-skiing or leaping off cliffs into hills of hot sand or diving off the dock into shallow water on a chilly morning, or like asking for directions, finding a job, picking an apartment, making friends, haggling deals, fighting the urge to be a girl like you're supposed to be and stay home and read a book, wearing a flowered dress and sandals instead of Toughskins cut-offs and sneakers, this swing trip takes strength--of body and of will.

Who's to say you can't climb up that tree and glide down that cable and jump into the soft ground cover even if your arms and legs are skinny and tender and your long hair gets caught in the branches and your cousins and brother worry aloud that you'll fall. Who's to say that you can't hang on tighter out of stubbornness, because you've always done what they do, and will keep on doing until they finally find out that you are weaker than they.

By that time, you'll have captured your private moments of bravery, when the swing moves so fast and with such purpose that you can't see anything and don't have time to worry about anything, but can only enjoy the wind blowing into your open mouth. By that time, you'll have become more courageous than they ever noticed.