

PLUNGING INTO SUMMER

Mary Speckhard

(1) I was standing at the base of the tree. My bare feet were sensitive to the pine needles blanketing my uncle's four-acre island in Northern Wisconsin, but I had learned from past experience that it was useless to try to protect them: the black sap inevitably stained my soft, winter skin. I ran my toes over the roots and knots of the ancient pine and felt again the coarse texture of the bark of the tree.

(2) The first dive each summer always required this same extreme preliminary concentration; I enjoyed the sense of anticipation, and I had to boost my confidence as well. Finally I pulled taut the rope which hung from the outermost branch, loosening and tightening my grip until my hands felt comfortable on the crudely tied knots. Letting the rope support me, I leaned back and began my tedious ascent of the trunk of the tree. Because the tree leaned at nearly a forty-five degree angle, I looked like a first-time mountain climber, cautious and often awkward. My watery reflection was distorted by the ripples that encircled the edges of the rocks lining the shore. These rocks, which no one ever thought to remove, were the most dangerous element in the jump, having bruised and scratched more than one of my adventurous relatives.

(3) When I arrived, almost perpendicular to the trunk of the tree, I balanced on my left foot and placed the bottom knot of the rope between the toes of my right foot. The tender skin there, just a few months healed of the blisters from last year's vacation episodes, revolted with a burning sensation. I tried to ignore also the low moaning of the tree under my weight as I concentrated on keeping my balance above the swirling water. Then, pushing my body away from the massive trunk, I fought for my breath against the seemingly omnipotent wind. At the apex of the rope's extension, I thrust my legs upward, arched my back, and tilted my head to the water. Achieving this swan-like position, I freed my white-knuckled hands from the rope, dove backwards in a half circle, and cut into the water smoothly, my pointed toes the last to submerge.

(4) Surfacing, I watched the pendulum swing of the rope slowly die until its slight movement was due only to the summer breeze. No one had witnessed my feat and there was no lasting evidence of it, but in my heart I felt a sense of accomplishment and that was always what was most important.