

Jay's Runaway Pack

It was late in the summer of sixty-eight
that we launched our canoes in Astray Lake,
and headed down wilderness rivers and streams,
in that land of enchantment, legends and dreams.

As we paddled our way past lichen-draped trees,
our goal was the far away Labrador seas,
nearly four hundred miles by the route we would take,
over portage trails faint, in the voyageur's wake.

That trip was the coldest that I've ever known,
with snow squalls and sleet that chilled to the bone,
but the arduous detours 'round gorges and falls,
will most be remembered for busting our ____.

Forty years have now passed since that wilderness trip.
Fond memories linger, though beginning to slip.
But there's one recollection that always comes back.
It's the time I chased after Jay's runaway pack.

Each day we switched boats in our party of six.
My good fortune this day was stern-paddling Dick's.
From his Chestnut Prospector, with the others behind,
at each hazard we'd signal, to be portaged or lined.

We were cruising along, things going quite well,
'til a thunderous sound up ahead broke the spell.
Foaming rapids and eddies (wow, what a sight!)
with likely still more past some cliffs to the right.

We beached our canoe on a ledge that was smooth,
to wait for the others and plan our next move.
Where the portage trail started we hadn't a clue,
so while Dick looked around I unpacked our canoe.

But then I heard calls, and as I looked back,
the others were yelling, "Rescue the pack!"
So I glanced out across at the waves rushing past,
and there was Jay's pack, in midstream running fast.

I could see right away that I had to be quick.
There was no time to wait and discuss it with Dick.
So I launched his canoe in the utmost of haste,
and determined to catch it, I entered the chase.

For over a mile, I gained not an inch.

It was clear that the rescue would not be a cinch.
In whitewater like that, if forward you plow,
you'll take too much water right over your bow.

Now you're probably thinking, did Dick have a fright,
as both partner and boat disappeared out of sight?
Well, he knew I could manage, and chase it I must,
for in tripping together, there develops a trust.

So I finally caught up with that runaway pack,
but then what to do without breaking my back.
That packsack was known as a "Woods Number Two,"
quite a load by itself, but now water-soaked too.

So I towed it to shore, a task all its own.
It felt like it must have been loaded with stone.
When finally on land, I then set about
building a fire to dry everything out.

It contained all Jay's things, and even much more,
for he was chief cook, and so there he did store,
all the pots and utensils, even beverage and chow.
Might have managed without them, but not sure how.

In case you may wonder about having just two
of those oversized packs in each tripping canoe,
our portage technique is called "first load halfway."
(Let me try to explain it all some other day.)

I waited three hours for trip-mates to come,
but not too surprised, they must have had fun
fitting everything in, with one less canoe,
not only more luggage, but room for Dick too.

Well they finally pulled in, and what a relief,
especially for Jay, after all of his grief,
to find his things drying in front of the fire,
his clothing, his bedding, his belongings entire.

What happened next I will never forget.
Not even quite sure I've got over it yet.
Jay, overjoyed in this moment of bliss,
ran over to hug me and give me a kiss!