

Dad



He was a quiet man,
gentle and private,
“with a heart that was big
and warm and Irish,” his Lone Scout
pal wrote at his death.

Sloping shoulders and concave
chest, a modest
paunch around the middle
told of a sedentary calling,
a man “who always worked harder
than the average man thinks necessary,”
his best friend said.

Anxiety hung like a noose,
a free-lance illustrator’s work,
never done,
a month gone by
with nothing to show
and the next month’s mortgage
due.

Growing up poor,
a widow's only son,
placed burdens on a young man
too deep to bear.

He wasn't always melancholy.
His puckish humor displayed
in sketches of Huck Finn
boys and whimsical rabbits,
graced the covers of
Canadian Youth, a publication
for lonely, rural boys like him.

Even while courting,
the tiny cartoon figures penned
in ink on the envelopes of
love notes sent to the stunning,
willful woman
he finally won.

But commerce demanded pictures of
adoring women and macho men
in postures of alarm and daring do.

His heart lay rather in those
paintings he did for himself,
on sketching trips in the Ontario north
of his youth: of sawmills deep
in the boreal; of men hauling
canoes across portages,
of families snowshoeing
through December drifts
the bellowing smokestacks and smelters,
of Sudbury and Copper Cliff.

He died too young.
I saw him when he first collapsed,
ran to him, on the lawn.

Told him to get to a doctor
but he never would.

His children's books now
collectors' items,
sell on the Internet.
But his legacy to us:
a world of astonished
power and beauty
forever lost,
except in those paintings
he left.

~Sheila D. Collins