

Skull Rapids

By George Vos

First day on the Colorado,
glorious staircase of sparkling water
and spruce-scented air.
Midday cliffs glow ocher,
later deepen to wet Georgia clay.
Swallows flit near river's surface;
snare small fish, then soar to
Cliffside wattle and daub nests
full of outstretched beaks.
Beaver pack swims alongside our boat,
slap their tails when they dive.
We are seven on this adventure.
Richard, trip leader and rudder man;
long-time water bugs Joan and Henry;
plus four who've never-been-on-a-river.
Less than three days to bond into one
for our run through Skull Rapids.

Highland paradise morphs into
hostile desert on day two.
Unremitting sun
bakes bodies and blisters skin.
River full of parasites;
warm canteen water must placate thirst.
Sisyphian headwinds whistle up canyon,
to push us back if effort lags.
Strong, continuous paddle strokes
slowly pulls raft downstream.
Richard: "I give up!"
Throws paddle onto raft floor.
We labor against wind
and sing a chantey
to the lyric,
"Either work or walk!"
Finally, Richard paddles.
Evening campfire talk near-mutinous.
Tomorrow terrifies first-timers;
danger ahead with no leader.
We scarcely sleep that night.

Eternal
moment
of
terror
'til raft shoots through Skull's
narrow left gap,
skips across water like a flat stone.
Seven paddles lift in unison to
screams of inchoate pleasure.