

Now this other island world,
pizza at Errikos' restaurant, his daughter
back in Greece, drought here, all the grass dead,
the world reaching the boiling point, the Kingston ferry
arriving out of a heat haze, glittering hints
of all the lights of the city seen far off,
and like the earth I'm badly in need of rain.



Morning soundscape. The two great wheezes as the engine of the ferry starts. An abrasion of tones as gulls shriek, slow, slow, fast fast fast fast fast. A continuous uneven hum, the fan in the composting toilet. A voice over water. Gulls again. An engine idling, maybe the shit truck pumping out the restaurant holding tank. A screen door bangs. The high rattle of swallows. The drum percussion of a car door closing. The sound of your breathing close to my ear.

Heard on the morning news:
a plague of aphids strikes Toronto. I will carry buckets of water to the parched gardens.
Christiaan, on retreat here by times, has been planting trees, has left strange antiquities to accompany the intricate history of Wolfe Island's oldest house.
The mallards paddle by, the swallows skim, silently, while the gulls persist with their scrawk opera, duets in ugly gull. Up the narrow stairs in the dim attic among tools, detritus, storage various, where the old wood is burned dark by time and air hangs Christiaan's ex, framed, a perfect young body:
Nude on a Motorcycle clipped from the newspaper.



After lunch, it rained briefly, woke me from my nap,
cleared. Now a soft, unreal shower patterns the river.
Whatever we mean by lyric lives in these walls
decorated with my whimsies and obsessions.
French doors open, the glass pane reflects the water
running grey under wind, the dim reverse image
of a storm coming on. I lie observing it,
and mystery is here, how we are everybody,
my ghosts, the links of gossip, what inhabited
me, what I invented, what I didn't do
or did. Facing me where I sit is a wall
which once was a door, now closed for good. Where I stand
in the morning to watch cumulus clouds sailing
over the rippled shallows, a wall stood, plastered and solid.
I discovered traces of an earlier passage, and so I
dared to smash through, illuminating the room.
(Once in a longer, older back porch Louis LaRush
played fiddle for shindigs. When he was on the outs
with Dora, his wife, he'd move down to the boathouse.
I have all this from a neighbour, ancient now,
who sneaked down here after school to play with the girls
against the strict orders of her father, the teacher.)
Doors and windows, the secrets of within and without
and what is beyond, the unseen casting shadows
on the visible, as sunlight prints the web
of net curtain on the corner of this page. Mornings
I get up and before I dress walk to the light, see
what colour the water reflects today, listen
for the obscure small messages from the past.

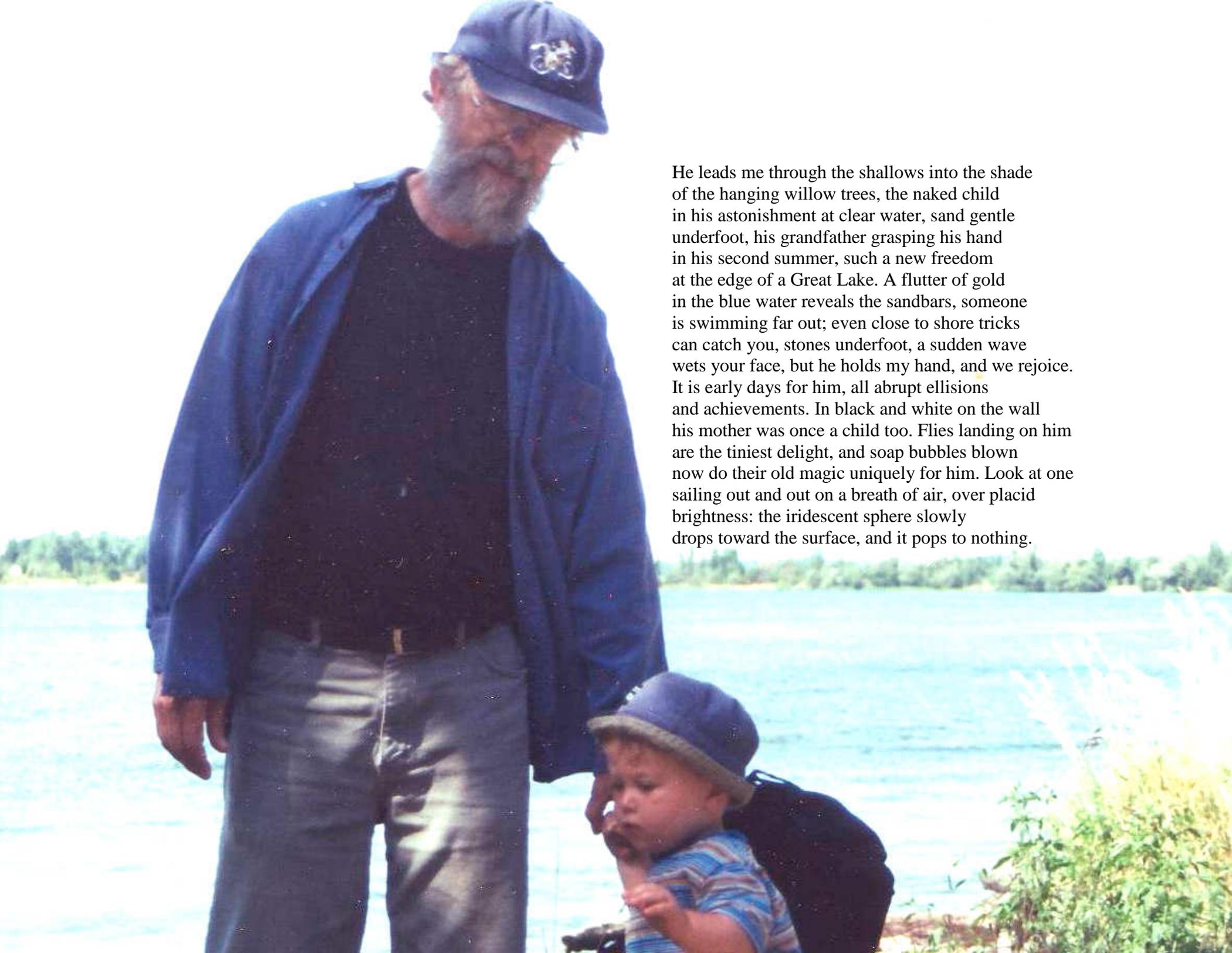


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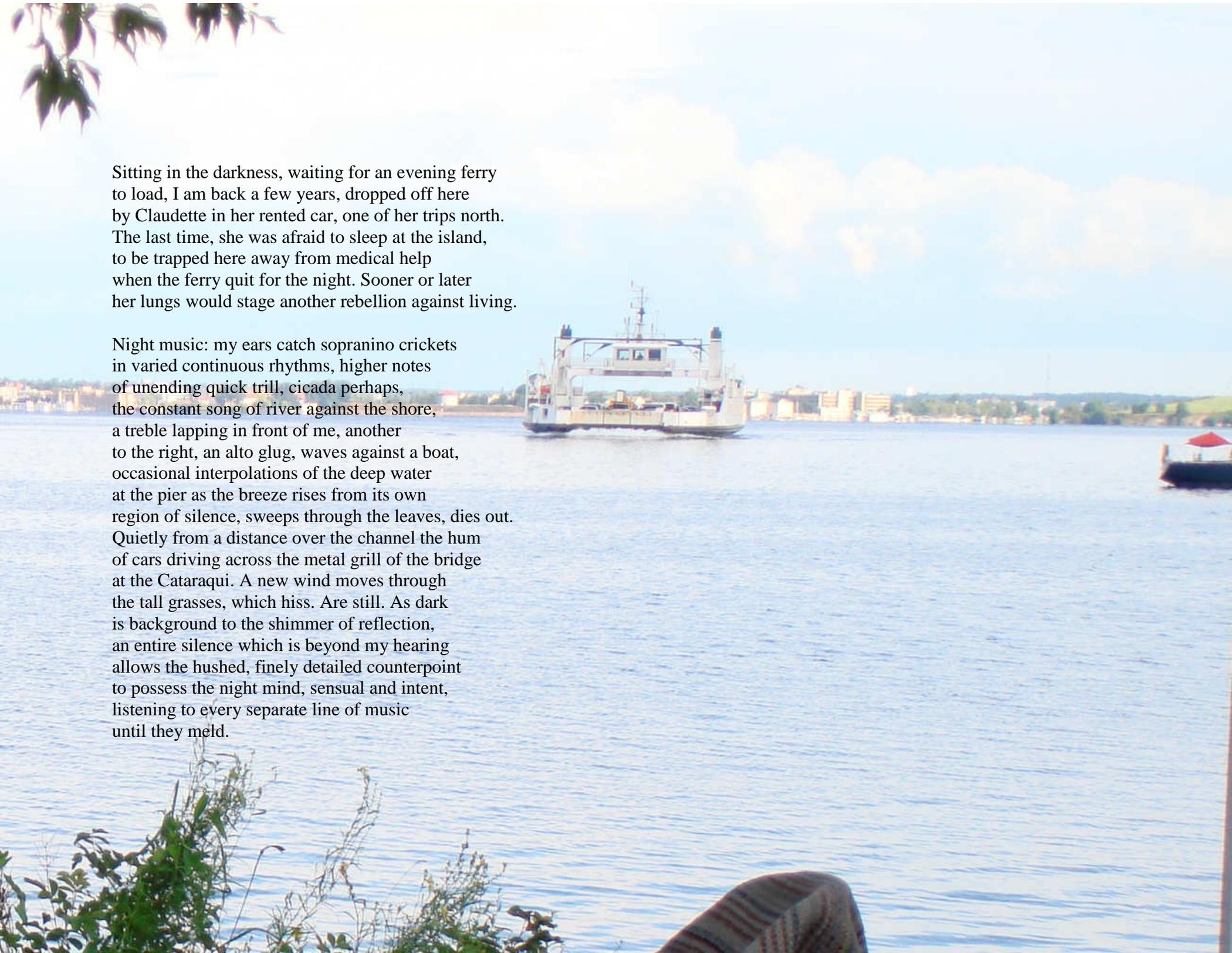
October 1, 1880: the torn clipping survives
glued to a board wall near two framed photographs--
my tiny daughters seen among dinosaurs.
Maggie stares intently into a glass case
at a great-toothed head, her face fixed and eager
with fierce imaginings. In the other frame
the two children look upward, from a giant reptile's
long fossil feet toward a crested skull,
sun from high windows falling on the seized moment
among those remnants of Saurian triumph.

Like moods of pure mind the hours of the day pass through
a white room, walls and ceiling and pale floor
touched with a trembling luminescence arriving
from elsewhere, the passage of reflection
through space to these quiet surfaces, a transit
of slow shadows, minute by minute until the sun
in its regular suite of changes reaches
the window, and the room is stunned with brightness.





He leads me through the shallows into the shade of the hanging willow trees, the naked child in his astonishment at clear water, sand gentle underfoot, his grandfather grasping his hand in his second summer, such a new freedom at the edge of a Great Lake. A flutter of gold in the blue water reveals the sandbars, someone is swimming far out; even close to shore tricks can catch you, stones underfoot, a sudden wave wets your face, but he holds my hand, and we rejoice. It is early days for him, all abrupt ellisions and achievements. In black and white on the wall his mother was once a child too. Flies landing on him are the tiniest delight, and soap bubbles blown now do their old magic uniquely for him. Look at one sailing out and out on a breath of air, over placid brightness: the iridescent sphere slowly drops toward the surface, and it pops to nothing.



Sitting in the darkness, waiting for an evening ferry to load, I am back a few years, dropped off here by Claudette in her rented car, one of her trips north. The last time, she was afraid to sleep at the island, to be trapped here away from medical help when the ferry quit for the night. Sooner or later her lungs would stage another rebellion against living.

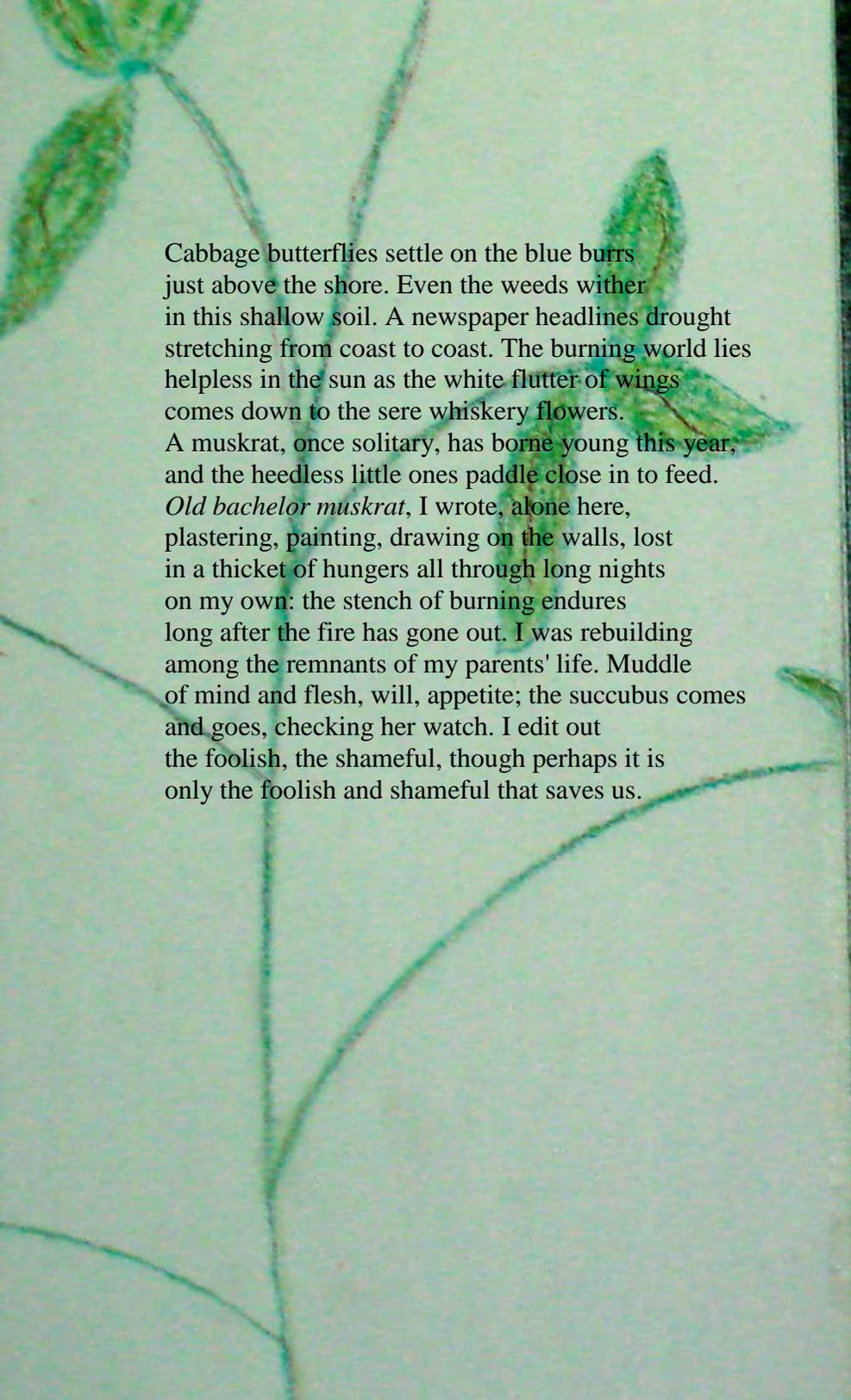
Night music: my ears catch soprano crickets in varied continuous rhythms, higher notes of unending quick trill, cicada perhaps, the constant song of river against the shore, a treble lapping in front of me, another to the right, an alto glug, waves against a boat, occasional interpolations of the deep water at the pier as the breeze rises from its own region of silence, sweeps through the leaves, dies out. Quietly from a distance over the channel the hum of cars driving across the metal grill of the bridge at the Cataract. A new wind moves through the tall grasses, which hiss. Are still. As dark is background to the shimmer of reflection, an entire silence which is beyond my hearing allows the hushed, finely detailed counterpoint to possess the night mind, sensual and intent, listening to every separate line of music until they meld.

August, and these are the dog days,
nothing to do but kill flies as the sun's heat,
reflected from soil and rock and water, comes at us
through doors, windows, walls, roof. Flypapers hang
from the ceiling. Hot wind, shapes of sunlight
in the billowing curtain. Swatters smack in two rooms.
Later, sitting by the water, we see a plane,
contrail, high in the blue, catching the last sunlight.
Tomorrow Kate, the pretty child in the photo
on the wall, flies to New York, a few hours there
to test a scanning electron microscope, then back
to recommend its purchase or not at a price
of half a million dollars. The tall world goes on.



Sunday evening and I'm reflecting
on how a life can be chaptered, years turned into pages,
all this because I'm skimming a biography
of Robert Frost. Even one lived day is an endless
parade of events. This morning the composting
toilet was leaking brown fluid on the floor.
At six in the evening, we sat at a level crossing
and I counted sixty-four cars of a freight,
a homage to my childhood when I never saw a train
without counting the cars, and at the end
as final punctuation, the caboose.
Magical word. But recording all this ignores
the three-legged, one-eyed border collie herding
sheep at a trial, and all the rest of this long day.
Above me now a dozen dark spiders weave and wait,
unconcerned about a man beneath them scribbling.
How can biography ever tell the truth
of twenty thousand days, each one full of minutes?
What we get is one angle, narrative clichés,
the facts that chance preserved, some moralizing,
polished anecdotes. Truth is all in the unknown.





Cabbage butterflies settle on the blue burrs
just above the shore. Even the weeds wither
in this shallow soil. A newspaper headlines drought
stretching from coast to coast. The burning world lies
helpless in the sun as the white flutter of wings
comes down to the sere whiskery flowers.
A muskrat, once solitary, has borne young this year,
and the heedless little ones paddle close in to feed.
Old bachelor muskrat, I wrote, alone here,
plastering, painting, drawing on the walls, lost
in a thicket of hungers all through long nights
on my own: the stench of burning endures
long after the fire has gone out. I was rebuilding
among the remnants of my parents' life. Muddle
of mind and flesh, will, appetite; the succubus comes
and goes, checking her watch. I edit out
the foolish, the shameful, though perhaps it is
only the foolish and shameful that saves us.



One night

(the house like a ship at sea) the wind rose, swept
over the island. I climbed out of bed, watched lightning
in every window, blue fire seizing the air,
a boat at anchor leaping on the waves. Trees fell.
Roads closed. Then it was August, and you stood
bare and white in the enamel tub as I poured
cups of shining water on your skin, and we both laughed.
Tom's photo on the wall approved your bravery;
the shock of his sudden death had brought you to this place.
I wrote a poem about how my dreams were changing.
Now every year in summer the old house waits for us
to come back over the water into its history.
A sketch you drew of it that year hangs by the bed
where we doze among the sounds of lapping water.