

**Polio**  
**by Nicholas Ruddock**

In 1953 the polio virus hovered over the summertime streets of Toronto, it multiplied in the warmth of slow-moving creeks and in the shallow sands of Ward's Island, in rainfall it slipped down from the canopy of maple, elm, heat and cicadas, vaporizing into random bedrooms thought secure, tasteless on the tongues of those who lay commingled there. Over breakfast we heard radio accounts of children slumped like rags, breathless, cyanotic, living out their lives within relentless metal carapaces, "iron lungs" pushing, pulling at the paralyzed chest itself incapable of moving air, and those children who had been rendered voiceless by tracheotomy used their teeth to go *click-click-click* drawing the attention of nurses to their plight (real or imagined) and the *click-click-clicking* ratcheted up as the sky darkened with ozone and thunder and the threat of power failure which would bring parents, neighbours and passers-by unimpeded to the open wards in a rush of fear-of-smothering, the starch white dresses of the nurses "like moths" amidst the to-and-fro swishing of tubes, the children lying as though beheaded, the sick quarantined, the healthy (you and I) taken to the cedar-filled air of Inverhuron where the second of the Great Lakes beat against a series of reefs straight out from shore, where in the last shelf of rock (before the lake dropped off to what seemed to us to be fathoms of darkness) we could see the petrified coral bodies of tiny crustaceans, locked into their airless world centuries before polio.