

Jude Nutter

## The Alchemist

*To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.*  
- Ludwig Wittgenstein

Down stream in the neon blades  
of their bodies the dragonflies patrol  
the borders of their invisible kingdoms.

Careless and loud, the boys come surging  
through the slough grass, crushing the jewel weeds'  
freckled pitchers and the purple spears of loosestrife;

and the sunlight, having made it down  
through the fussing of the cottonwoods, opens  
into welts of bronze and unfastens  
through the shallow water, each dropped  
moment a mouth in which the smallest fish  
become visible. And yet in less than a minute

those boys have churned the clarity to milt  
in their desire to harvest  
those minute cups of silver that appear  
wherever the feet of the water striders bend the skin

of the stream. And I am thinking about the boys  
of my childhood who came in a dark rush, pouring  
through the neighbourhood on their bikes with tongues  
of cardboard gargling between the spokes  
of each front wheel; who lobbed toads and frogs - flung  
the perfect dark-green fruit of their bodies -  
under cars, down in the dip where the stream  
slipped into a culvert beneath the road. I remember

the bright harm of bicycles sown among the rushes  
and cord grass; sticklebacks thrown  
on the bank to die, their throats plugged  
with tiny fists of fire. I remember a stray so desperate  
for touch, so broken with need, that it minced  
straight into the noose of their tightening circle.

And there were catapults and there were stones,  
and there were the broken convex cups of nests  
and fledglings scrambling for a purchase in the air's

bright chute, a second or two of gliding  
that none could sustain. Those that survived simply kept  
the funnels of their wide throats open and were fed  
small twigs and lengths of string. I thought birds  
existed beyond the flesh – that they were simply  
small fractures of sky that feathers, somehow,  
clung to – so I remember the affront of skin  
between a stubble of pinfeathers. I remember  
beaks closing and opening. I remember a rending

that had no sound. I remember  
watching television with the volume down  
because the silence made sense of the women  
weeping. I remember the mouth's wet threshold.  
Bodies in prayer. Bodies on fire. A solitary  
ox still towing a plow through a rice paddy, hock deep  
in its furrowed isinglass, and everywhere soldiers  
festooned with leis of ammunition marching  
in staggered file. And the girl I was back then

who witnessed everything, what defense can I claim,  
now, for her? Only, that in the face of all evidence,  
her belief was constant. The boys were always slipping  
behind the tree line's scrim and she was always  
wavering there, on the frontier, her left foot  
parting the understory, wrapped in its ankle boot

of shadow. This is where we meet, then,  
that girl and I: where the boys are forever a jigsaw  
of bright shirts and leaves and the hard  
sheen of hair; where she is forever  
holding her stance, holding my gaze, holding  
me accountable for the future

of which she is already certain.  
And not once does she open her lips. She knows,  
already, that whenever I write, my whole body  
becomes a mouth; that I can deny  
those boys every cruelty they go on to commit

and so transform them, in memory, to mere  
glints of dread – the glass shard, the knife blade, the flensed  
stick. And the nail, point upward, in the grass of the garden.

Where she is waiting, with no catapult,  
no rock, no rope. No visible weapon of any kind.