

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.