

The New York Review of Books

Children's Book

James Arthur

JULY 14, 2016 ISSUE

In which a newborn cricket walks across a field,
unable to reply to the greetings of the mantis, the moth,
and the dragonfly, until his rubbing of wing on wing

becomes a sound that can speak for him. When the last page turns,
the book itself makes a chirruping. Here is the church, and the steeple.
Here is the coffee table where the child lines up a squad

of plastic people. Can the child tell the difference
between himself and other things? He totters back and forth
on a tractor mounted on a spring. Here's the tension

of a string pulled tight, and the child's father rolling over and over
and over in the night: the cricket book, after much rough reading,
now chirrups nightly on its own. Finally the father, knowing

what must be done, cuts into the book with a sturdy paring knife,
looking for whatever little engine, whatever little part,
makes the lifelike cricket sound. Here is the trailer, the baler,

the harrow, the plough. Can a stem grow up from inside a stone?
Here is how to sit in silence and be alone. Here's the yard
where yesterday the child sat watching as blowing branches made

and remade daggers of light and shade. The book's voice box,
to the father's eye, looks like a dime-sized bicycle bell,
and as he pries it free, the chirruping intensifies,

becoming something like the death cry of a creature
with an actual beating heart; something like a metal prong
banging indifferently on another metal part.
