

Reactions of Alkali Metals

There were other members of the alkali metal family even more reactive than sodium...It was fascinating to compare the reactivities of all five by putting small lumps of each into water. One had to do this gingerly, with tongs, and to equip oneself and one's guests with goggles: lithium would move about the surface of the water sedately, reacting with it, emitting hydrogen, until it was gone; a lump of sodium would move around the surface with an angry buzz, but would not catch fire if a small lump was used; potassium, in contrast, would catch fire the instant it hit the water, burning with a pale mauve flame, and shooting globules of itself everywhere; rubidium was still more reactive, sputtering violently with a reddish flame; and cesium, I found, exploded when it hit water, shattering its glass container. One never forgot the properties of alkali metals after this.

Oliver Sacks – *Uncle Tungsten: Memoirs of a Chemical Boyhood*