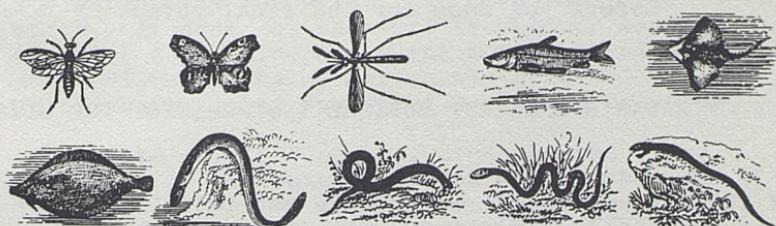


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ONE OF THE WORLD'S FIVE MOST EXCITING PROFESSIONS

"There are only four jobs in the world
worth having: an actor, a rock star,
a jet fighter pilot and President."

-- Tom Cruise's flight instructor

To these, Tom, you may add a fifth:
poet.

As you leave the house
on a very daring and very devilish
mission, a small crowd waiting across the street
sets off a cheer and overwhelms you
for your autograph.

At a reading, a shot
sings past your ear and you tactfully retreat

behind the lecturn.

Danger?

You are used
to it. No one knows the risks
a poet runs.

You walk a tight and slippery
metaphor but your fans see only the grace,
the bravura, the incredible act
of balance.

It takes guts to be a poet.

It takes more than talent and a pretty face.

Tom, you have to work hard, you need drive
and charisma and a kind
of gallant ruthlessness.

When you reach the heights,
the future fits the palm of your hand.

The climb
was hard but the view is worth it: the earth
spins below, dizzying and brilliant, as you loop
up once
before you zoom for the final rhyme.

ONE OF JAPAN'S EARLIEST MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, THE BIWA

In the illustrated scroll
of The Tale of Genji, we see the man bent
over the biwa's figgy form with its two
crescent eyes bobbing up back-to-back
in a pulpy sky, mirroring precisely
the arch of the man's brows, but more seductive.

The woman's face crouches in a crack

of her kimono, so sleek
and so fat, a soybean popping from its husk,
beanlike in expression, beanlike in beauty.

Persian poets invariably fit
the lover's face with a moon, but here I will
praise the man's face for its mooniness, stuck fast
to the pasty shoulder like one bit

of rice cake mounted upon
another. Here in the twentieth century
we have learned to smile at the biwa's buzzing,
rather lemony notes, and as slips
glide like fingerlings through your grasp, I observe
how, even though the biwa's sound-holes were meant
to copy human brows, yours eclipse

the biwa's eyes in the way
they magnify your laughter. You do not fret
when your touch loses its foothold on a fret, but
something mimic and wry monkeyshines
your face, gladdening me that the waxed and wooden
ways of love are of the past. Your fingers plunk!
and plunk! just so, on the silky twines

in the same way that you pluck
my chords. Then, when the song is done and we lose