

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

our words, we slither into the brocade pod
of sleep overembroidered with our charms
(though neither of us is moonlike or beanlike).
But I wake, and want you again, and slide down
into the harmony of your arms.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE DÉCORATION DES NYMPHÉAS

The surface is not water. It does not forge
water. It does not shimmer, tremble or shudder
as water does. There are the monstrous black-purples
and indigo-purples of rotten wisteria
only a half-choked eye might be forced to utter

as it dabbles its wings too close to the flame,
and wide, trowel-shaped slashes of cinnamon red
that surely have no place on water unless fresh
embers of war are falling there or the shadows
of a vermilion lacquer bridge. Webs of lead,

meant to collect the jasper-green and jade-green
glass of lily pads, enriched instead with fused
enamel and luster in strange salamander shades,
bristle -- they cannot float -- above the shattered
malachite facets of the pond. We are used

to such encrustings, as though the efflorescence
of liverworts on stone or the rosepetal scales
that flake from fish, in the gold and cloisonne
work of Byzantine book covers or the altar
front of St. Mark's, sometimes on the wings and tails

of Mogul enamel geese and ducks; we least
expect mosaics or shell cameos on cloth.
And yet, beneath this deceptively amorphous
web -- we scarcely call it 'paint' -- lie the fossil
Gothic bones of those years and years of behemoth

cathedrals that Monet so laboriously
reconstructed there: the pillars, arches, vaults,
braces, purlins, ribs and buttresses. Moated
inside the nineteen panels of his last work,
one senses the lack of wind, of sun; the faults

of color that will never abide dragonflies.
Then, among those violet-rinsed greens and blue-browns,
a substance flows. It sounds with the solemnity
of sculpture but pulses with trills; and the eye,
and what lives through the eye, flies in it and drowns.