

Rita Dove
LBJ Lecture March 10, 1998

UNEDITED

LBJ distinguished lecture
Remarks for President Jerome Supple
Evans Auditorium
Tuesday, March 10, 1998
7:30 p.m.

We are delighted that all of you could be here this evening.

This lecture is a bit different from most of our Lyndon B. Johnson Distinguished Lectures because we are combining it with the Therese Kayser Lindsey literary series.

So tonight we honor two special alumni — one a former president, member of the class of 1930. . .

and one a noted Texas writer and arts patron and member of the class of 1905.

Tonight's speaker is appropriate company for Gerald Ford, Barbara Jordan, Jim Lehrer and others who have given LBJ Lectures in the past.

She is also now in the company of James Dickey, Horton Foote, Alice Walker, John Graves, Nikki Giovanni and others who have been part of the Therese Kayser Lindsey Literary Series.

Rita Dove has gathered most of the accolades available to American poets.

In 1987 she earned a Pulitzer Prize for her book of poetry entitled *Thomas and Beulah* based on the life of her grandparents.

In 1993 she was named Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, the highest official honor in American letters.

She has also received top honors from the NAACP, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the American Academy of Achievement, the International Platform Association and has been named one of the ten outstanding women of the year by *Glamour* magazine.

Most recently she received the 1996 Heinz award in the Arts and Humanities, one of the largest individual achievement prizes in the world . . .

And the 1996 Charles Frankel prize, our government's highest honor for writers and scholars in the humanities.

Currently she holds the Commonwealth Chair of English at the University of Virginia.

We are delighted to have her at Southwest Texas.

Please join me in welcoming Rita Dove.

Rita Dove

Thank you. It is such a pleasure for me to be here in San Marcos.

I have a soft spot in my heart for this area of the world. This is where my husband and I did our courting, if I may use such an old-fashioned word. We, I guess twenty, twenty-one years ago, I guess I really shouldn't use words, I shouldn't count

them But I was finishing up my graduate studies at the University of Iowa and Fred was a guest lecturer in the German department at Austin. And so we pretty much, if there were frequent flyer miles then we would have had quite a few frequent flyer miles, instead we drove back and forth visiting each other and toured the Texas Hill Country and it's just great to be back.

It's a lot different than it was twenty-one years ago—a lot more people. But the land is still out there. It did make me slightly nostalgic and I began thinking what has happened in these last twenty-one years in my life and I thought tonight what I would like to do is to give you in poetry, in poems, a sense of an education of a young poet; how I came to be standing before you today.

It's like all things, I think, important to one, they begin almost by accident and they begin very small. When I was a child, the thing I liked to do most of all was escape what I was supposed to do. That's I think one of the laws of childhood: to escape what you're supposed to do. The moments I remember most are the moments I snatched from, times I was supposed to be doing chores, or reading. And this poem, which is a new poem talks about those kinds of moments:

Sing Song

When I was young, the moon spoke in riddles
and the stars rhymed. I was a new toy
waiting for my owner to pick me up.

When I was young, I ran the day to its knees.
There were trees to swing on, crickets for capture.

I was narrowly sweet, infinitely cruel,
tongued in honey and coddled in milk,
sunburned and silvery and scabbed like a colt.

And the world was already old.
And I was older than I am today

People will ask me what is a suitable subject for a poem. And I've never known how to answer that question because I think the whole world is a suitable subject for a poem. I can never predict when a poem is going to strike, when I'm going to be forced to sit down and write it out and what will interest me.

When I was very [young] I was uncertain what I wanted to do in this world. I was torn between three things, and they were music (I played the cello) and literature, and mathematics. I loved math for the way there was an answer. Of course, nowadays when you go into really higher math there are not any answers there either. But at that age I thought it was so wonderful to get the answer right.

Now one of the things that I hated as a child were flashcards, and I swore that I would never make my children do flashcards, they are, philosophically speaking, very much like life itself: they keep coming and coming and you solve one and the next one's right there. My father is a scientist, he's a chemist, and he loved to do the drilling of the flashcards, so I promised my daughter when she was younger I'd never make her do

flashcards—what a silly promise. When the time came, I did, and as penance, she asks me to read this poem whenever I give her reading:

Flashcards

In math I was the whiz kid, keeper
of oranges and apples. What you don't understand,
master, my father said; the faster I answered,
the faster they came

I could see one bud on the teacher's geranium,
one clear bee sputtering at the wet pane.
The tulip trees always dragged after a heavy rain
So I tucked my head as my boots slapped home.

My father put up his feet after work
and relaxed with a highball and *The Life of Lincoln*.
After supper we drilled and I climbed the dark

before sleep, before a thin voice hissed
numbers as I spun on a wheel. I had to guess.
Ten, I kept saying, I'm only ten.

But that too passes away.

This is a recent poem, which is really penned to all those libraries where you're actually allowed to walk through the stacks. I don't know if the library here is one. Can you walk through the stacks here? Halleluia! There's nothing better than to stumble upon a book by accident. And I still haven't been able to stumble upon anything on the Internet in quite that way—though I am an Internet junkie. So this poem is a testimonial to the library of my youth, which was in Akron, Ohio:

Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967

For a fifteen-year-old there was plenty
to do: browse the magazines,
slip into the Adult section to see
What vast *tristesse* was born of rush-hour traffic,
décolletés, and the plague of too much money.
There was so much to discover—how to
lay out a road, the language of flowers,
and the place of women in the tribe of Moost.
There were equations elegant as a French twist,
fractal geometry's unwinding maple leaf.

I could follow, step-by-step, the slow disclosure
of a pineapple Jell-O mold—or take

the path of Harold's purple crayon through
the bedroom window and onto a lavender
spill of stars. Oh, I could walk any aisle
and smell wisdom, put a hand out to touch
the rough curve of bound leather,
the harsh parchment of dream.

As for the improbably librarian
with her salt and paprika upsweep,
her British accent and sweater clip
(mom of a kid I knew from school)—
I'd go up to her desk and ask for help
on bareback rodeo or binary codes,
phonics, Gestalt theory,
lead poisoning in the Late Roman Empire,
The play of light in Dutch Renaissance painting,
I would claim to be researching
pre-Columbian pottery or Chinese foot-binding,
but all I wanted to know was:
*Tell me what you've read that keeps
that half smile afloat
above the collar of your impeccable blouse.*

So I read *Gone With the Wind* because
it was big, and haiku because they were small.
I studied history for its rhapsody of dates,
lingered over Cubist art for the way
it showed all sides of a guitar at once.
All the time in the world was there, and sometimes
all the world on a single page.
As much as I could hold
on my plastic card's imprint I took,
greedily: six books, six volumes of bliss,
the stuff we humans are made of:
words and sighs and silence,
ink and whips, Brahma and cosine,
corsets and poetry and blood sugar levels—
I carried it home, five blocks of aluminum siding
and past the old garage where, on its boarded-up doors,
someone had scrawled:

I CAN EAT AN ELEPHANT
IF I TAKE SMALL BITES.

*Yes, I said to no one in particular: That's
What I'm gonna do!*

Libraries were one education, the other education came from my relatives, my family, my grandfather, my grandmother my aunts and uncles who told the best stories if you were wise enough to be quiet and pretend that you weren't there. And if they forgot that you were there, as a child, they'd tell the good stories. My relative's stories, that they told, which had morals to them, but they wouldn't tell you what the moral was—you had to figure it out.

My grandfather was especially good at that. He'd tell a story and about twenty years later I would suddenly be turning a corner and think, "That's what he meant." This was one of those stories, this is from my book *Thomas and Beulah*, which is a group of poems about my grandparents' lives—the first part tells the story of my grandfather from his point of view, and the second part is my grandmother. This is from the first part, from my grandfather's part.

They are a couple of things that you would have learned from the book if I made you listen to all the poems up to this point, but he comes from a little town in Tennessee called Wartrace (so called because the Civil War did go through there). It's the home of the Tennessee walking horse, if you don't know what a walking horse is its particular characteristics you'll find out from the poem, and there's also a reference in this poem to an encyclopedia called *The Warner Encyclopedia*, it is, as far as I know, the only book that was ever published in my hometown, Akron, Ohio. I found it in a St. Vincent de Paul secondhand store in Arizona of all places and took it immediately as a sign. It had 25 volumes, one was missing, and I think that's why it was on sale. But, I collect old encyclopedias, this one is from 1909, one of the reasons that I am fascinated by encyclopedias is to find out what they thought was factual, what they thought was true enough to put in black and white within their covers. There are a couple of quotes from the *Werner Encyclopedia* in this poem, things that they believed were true in 1909. In this poem, Thomas, grandfather, is telling stories to his grandchildren.

Roast Possum

*The possum's a greasy critter
that lives on persimmons and what
the Bible calls carrion.*

So much from the 1909 Werner
Encyclopedia, three rows of deep green
along the wall. A granddaughter
propped on each knee,
Thomas went on with his tale—

but it was for Malcolm, little
Red Delicious, that he invented
embellishments: *We shined that possum
with a torch and I shinnied up,
being the smallest,
to shake him down. He glared at me,
teeth bared like a shark's
in that torpedo snout.*

*Man he was tough but no match
for old-time know-how.*

Malcolm hung back, studying them
with his gold hawk eyes. When the girls
got restless, Thomas talked horses:
Strolling Jim, who could balance
a glass of water on his back
and trot the village square
without spilling a drop. Who put
Wartrace on the map and was buried
under a stone, like a man.

They liked that part.
He could have gone on to tell them
that the Werner admitted Negro children
to be intelligent, though briskness
clouded over at puberty, bringing
indirection and laziness. Instead,
he added: *You got to be careful
with a possum when he's on the ground;
he'll turn on his back and play dead
till you give up looking. That's
what you'd call sullin'.*

Malcolm interrupted to ask
who owned Strolling Jim,
and who paid for the tombstone.
They stared each other down
man to man, before Thomas,
as a grandfather, replied:

*Yessir,
we enjoyed that possum. We ate him
real slow, with sweet potatoes.*

You've just got to know what you're looking for.

Also out of that book, a poem called "Gospel," which I once had a teacher claim that you could not describe music when you were writing, that was impossible, so of course the first thing I wanted to do was try to describe music, and this is one of those attempts.

Gospel

*Swing low so I
can step inside—*

a humming ship of voices
big with all

the wrongs done
done them.
No sound this generous
could fail:

ride joy until
it cracks like an egg,
make sorrow
seethe and whisper.

From a fortress
of animal misery
soars the chill voice
of the tenor, enraptured

with sacrifice.
What do I see,
he complains, notes
brightly rising

towards a sky
blank with promise.
Yet how healthy
the single contralto

settling deeper
into her watery furs!
Carry me home,
she cajoles, bearing

down. Candelabras
brim. But he slips
through God's net and swims
heavenward, warbling.

When I was young and would go to my parent's church, it was so wonderful to see the interaction in the gospel choir, even though you had all those parts, there was a lot of room for improvisation. Sometimes there would be these battles between the tenors and the contraltos or something like that. It was wonderful to see.

Another kind of music, another era, this is a poem to Billy Holliday. There's an expression that jazz musicians would use when they referred to the female vocals, which is

“canary.” Of course there are obvious reasons for that, the beautiful song of the bird, but also the canary is that bird that miners would take down into the coal mines to test for gas leaks. They took down the cage, and if the bird died, then they knew there was a poison gas leak, and the shaft was not safe for men.

Canary

Billie Holiday’s burned voice
had as many shadows as lights,
a mournful candelabra against a sleek piano,
the gardenia her signature under that ruined face.

(Now you’re cooking, drummer to bass,
magic spoon, magic needle.
Take all day if you have to
with your mirror and your bracelet of song.)

Fact is, the invention of women under siege
has been to sharpen love in the service of myth.

If you can’t be free, be a mystery.

Where do poems come from?

I was watching television, sometimes they can even come from television, but I was watching a program a few years back on PBS which talked about all of those jazz and country musicians who travel in the South going from one place to another playing in the thirties and the forties. And what they had to contend with—particularly with segregation, and the fact that they could come into a town and not have any accommodations because none of the hotels would take them. But they would go over to the black part of town and someone would take them in, there’d be always a kindly older woman who would take in people. During this PBS special, they were interviewing people who had, in one particular town in South Carolina a very small town, and they interviewed a white man who was at that point quite old and he was saying, “You know, I know that there was segregation and that it was very hard for the musicians but one of the curious things that happened was that when the bands would come to town, the reverse would be true. The blacks in town would dance to the music on the ground floor, and the whites because they had to be segregated were put up in the peanut gallery, up in the balcony. And they would watch. I know that we had it better than all them but sometimes I would look down on that dance floor and I thought, ‘It must be wonderful to be black on a Saturday night.’” So this for that:

Black on a Saturday Night

This is no place for lilac
or somebody on a trip

to themselves. Hips
are an asset here, and color
calculated to flash
lemon bronze cerise
in the course of a dip and turn.
Beauty's been caught lying
and the truth's rubbed raw:
Here, you get your remorse
as a constitutional right.

It's always what we don't
fear that happens, always
not now and why are
you people acting this way
(meaning we put in petunias
instead of hydrangeas and reject
ecru as a fashion statement).

But we can't do it - no, because
the wages of living are sin
and the wages of sin are love
and the wages of love are pain
and the wages of pain are philosophy
and that leads definitely to an attitude
and an attitude will get you
nowhere fast so you might as well
keep dancing dancing till
tomorrow gives up with a shout,
'cause there is only
Saturday night, and we are in it—
black as black can,
black as black does,
not a concept
nor a percentage
but a natural law.

My grandmother always wanted to go to Paris. She would tell, read about Paris in the library, she would go out and get books and she would talk about all the places you could go to see, when you went to Paris. My grandmother never did get a chance to get to go to Paris, but when I went to Paris, I went there for her the first time. When I saw these women walking the streets of Paris who knew how to stand up under the, what shall we say, the appreciation of a glance or a stare. They knew how to do it. And I thought, my grandmother would have felt right at home here. Looking at other people is a municipal sport in Paris, it is not impolite to look. The women who were looked at and

bore it with the most grace were those women from the islands—from Martinique and Réunion.

The Island Women of Paris

skim from curb to curb like regatta,
from Pont Neuf to the Quai de la Rappe
in cool negotiation with traffic,
each a country to herself
transposed to this city
by a fluke called "imperial courtesy."

The island women glide past held aloft
by a wire running straight to heaven.
Who can ignore their ornamental bearing,
turbans haughty as parrots,
or deft braids carved into airy cages
transfixed on their manifest brows?

The island women move through Paris
as if they had just finished inventing
their destinations. It's better
not to get in their way. And better
not look an island woman in the eye—
unless you like feeling unnecessary.

During my first time in Europe I spent a year studying German at the University of Tübingen. For the first two months, while the weather was still good, I would walk from my apartment to school and back. And I always passed by this very high hedged yard (so high that you couldn't see through it). When I went by, all I heard were birds, many more birds than anywhere else in town. So I began to fantasize what was behind that fence, and this is the poem that came out:

The Bird Frau

When the birds came home everything stopped
the way he left it--her apron, the back stairs
the sun losing altitude over France
as the birds scared up from the fields
a worrying curtain of flack—

Barmherzigkeit!

her son, her man. She went inside, fed the parakeet,
broke its neck. Spaetzle bubbling on the stove,
windchimes tinkling above the steam, her face

in the hall mirror, bloated, a heart.
Let everything go wild!

Blue jays, crows!
She hung suet from branches, the air quick
around her head with tiny spastic machinery
--starlings, finches--her head a crown of feathers.
She ate less, grew lighter, air tunneling
through bone singing

a small song
“Ein Liedchen Kinder!” The children ran away.
She moved about the yard like an old ragbird.
Still at war, she rose at dawn, watching out
for Rudi, come home on crutches,
the thin legs balancing his atom of life.

Someone once asked me why poets didn't right about happier things. And I think that I share this with many of my colleagues. I never felt that I was writing about bad things. I always felt that when you are happy you are content to be happy and you really don't feel like doing anything else except wallowing in happiness and when something troubles you, you need to make sense of it you need somehow to get to the bottom of it.

My particular medium happens to be writing. This next poem is a case in point.

I was troubled by this poem for about two years as I worked on it. What was troubling about it was that I had a hard time accepting the facts of the case. The facts are these: years ago in 1937 in the Dominican Republic, the dictator, General Rafael Trujillo, had ordered 20,000 Haitian blacks to be executed. The Haitians would work side-by-side with Dominicans in the cane fields and on this particular day in October, he decided that he would execute them by sorting them out from the Dominicans.

His way of sorting them out, as there was no way on the surface for him to tell who was Dominican and who was Haitian, was to have them pronounce a Spanish word with an “r” in it. The Haitians spoke a kind of creole and their rs were more like the French rs, they weren't rolled like the Spanish r. So he chose the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*. In his own kind of modern-day shibboleth he had them come up and pronounce the words. Those that could roll their rs lived, and those who could not died.

Now I had stumbled across this fact, actually in a book by a German writer Hubert Fichte called *Petersilie*, which is the German word for parsley. I couldn't believe it. I was in Germany, and I read this and I thought, “This isn't true. Nobody can be this cruel. Nobody can be this inventive in their cruelty.” And so I put a note down in my notebook, but I did not think that I would ever be able to write about it because it was too big; too horrific.

And yet, I could not forget about it either. So, for really about two years I would go back to it and try to write it and would fail and then I remembered that perhaps I was just being awed by the fact that it was so large and I needed to start very small and not think about the end result.

I began with the color of parsley—the color green. And then comes one of those accidents that you cannot will. I was teaching a class in writing (it was a workshop) and

about an hour before class I got a phone call from one of my students who was going to be late, she said, because she worked in a pet shop and they had a new parrot there and the parrot needed to be trained and couldn't be left alone. And I said, "Just bring the parrot to class; it's okay." Mainly because I was trying to think of things that were as green as parsley and I had hit upon this idea that a parrot could be as green as parsley. But then I got very obsessed about the idea that I had to know what kind of parrot that it was.

So, she brought the parrot, which was not completely green, but it was partly green and it was a very well-behaved parrot, it walked up and down the conference table and it would do was pick up pencils and drop them off at her trainer's desk—she had a whole pile of pencils at the end. But it kept fairly quiet until afterwards I asked her if she could find out from the trainer if there were indeed parsley-green parrots. She did. She came back the next day. You just have to know who [sic] to ask. She said, "Yes there are, they're in Australia." But that didn't help me very much with this poem, I thought.

But then I realized I was so trapped with the facts—and I think that poetry is not about biographical truth, it's about an emotional truth—I had been so wrapped up with the facts that I was not allowing myself to fantasize about how he could come up with this word. And then I realized the poem I needed to write was a poem about how someone could be evil and creative at the same time. And to remember that evil is not boring, it is not stupid, it can be creative and intelligent. So, that parrot helped me get into this poem and I'll read it to you know. It's in two parts, and each part has a title.

Parsley

1. The Cane Fields

There is a parrot imitating spring
in the palace, its feathers parsley green.
Out of the swamp the cane appears
to haunt us, and we cut it down. El General
searches for a word; he is all the world
there is. Like a parrot imitating spring,
we lie down screaming as rain punches through
and we come up green. We cannot speak an R—
out of the swamp, the cane appears
and then the mountain we call in whispers Katalina.
The children gnaw their teeth to arrowheads.
There is a parrot imitating spring.

El General has found his word: perejil.
Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining
out of the swamp. The cane appears
in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.

And we lie down. For every drop of blood
there is a parrot imitating spring.

Out of the swamp the cane appears.

2. The Palace

The word the general's chosen is parsley.
It is fall, when thoughts turn
to love and death; the general thinks
of his mother, how she died in the fall
and he planted her walking cane at the grave
and it flowered, each spring stolidly forming
four-star blossoms. The general
pulls on his boots, he stomps to
her room in the palace, the one without
curtains, the one with a parrot
in a brass ring. As he paces he wonders

Who can I kill today. And for a moment
the little knot of screams
is still. The parrot, who has traveled
all the way from Australia in an ivory
cage, is, coy as a widow, practicing
spring. Ever since the morning
his mother collapsed in the kitchen
while baking skull-shaped candies
for the Day of the Dead, the general
has hated sweets. He orders pastries
brought up for the bird; they arrive
dusted with sugar on a bed of lace.

The knot in his throat starts to twitch;
he sees his boots the first day in battle
splashed with mud and urine
as a soldier falls at his feet amazed—
how stupid he looked!—at the sound
of artillery. I never thought it would sing
the soldier said, and died. Now
the general sees the fields of sugar
cane, lashed by rain and streaming.

He sees his mother's smile, the teeth
gnawed to arrowheads. He hears
the Haitians sing without R's
as they swing the great machetes:
Katalina, they sing, Katalina,
mi madle, mi amol en muelle. God knows

his mother was no stupid woman; she
could roll an R like a queen. Even
a parrot can roll an R! In the bare room
the bright feathers arch in a parody
of greenery, as the last pale crumbs
disappear under the blackened tongue. Someone
calls out his name in a voice
so like his mother's, a startled tear
splashes the tip of his right boot.

My mother, my love in death.
The general remembers the tiny green sprigs
men of his village wore in their capes
to honor the birth of a son. He will
order many, this time, to be killed
for a single, beautiful word.

I always make a plan, and then I always change it.

I want to allow some time for questions and answers after, but let me first read
you a few poems from my most recent book, called *Mother Love*.

It's a book which is based on the Persephone and Demeter story—the Greek
myth—which I think all of you know. Basically, we have Demeter, who is the goddess
of agriculture, the goddess of crops, whose daughter goes out picking flowers with her
girlfriends, strays a little bit away from the group, and gets abducted by the god of the
underworld, by Hades. Ordinarily that would not, in a normal universe, there would be
no recourse, but since she was the goddess of agriculture, Demeter began to mourn, and
when she mourned, the earth began to die.

This is the only time that I know of, in the whole of Greek myths, where they
actually change the law because a mother had so much grief. Because the earth was
dying, Zeus decided that he would speak with his brother, with Hades, and he tried to talk
him into letting her go. Hades was willing to let her go but Persephone has eaten
pomegranate seeds when she was in hell, which meant that she could not completely
return to the earth. She had to spend six months underground, and six months
aboveground—which is why we have the seasons.

I began writing poems—many of them are sonnets—I began writing these, I
thought to explore the myth. My daughter, who was about six or seven at the time, began
to study the Greek myths in school and came in one day and said, “You’re writing about
us, it’s very clear.” So much for knowing what you’re writing about beforehand. But I
realized that one reason I was drawn to this was because it wasn’t simply a story about a
girl being abducted, but it was a story about mothers and daughters, and parents and
children, and how that cycle keeps continuing. A mother was a daughter once, and a
daughter may become a mother. It’s about more than just straying away, it’s also about
growing up and moving away. So, let me just read you a couple of poems from here to
give you a sense of this. Then I’ll open the floor to some questions. First of all a poem

that gives you both the classic myth and the more modern version of it, it's called "Persephone Falling." (She went to get a narcissus flower when she was abducted.)

One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful
flowers, one unlike all the others! She pulled,
stooped to pull harder—
when, sprung out of the earth
on his glittering terrible
carriage, he claimed his due.
It is finished. No one heard her.
No one! She had strayed from the herd.

(Remember: go straight to school.
This is important, stop fooling around!
Don't answer to strangers. Stick
with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.)
This is how easily the pit
opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground.

The daughter speaks.

The Narcissus Flower

I remember my foot in its frivolous slipper
a frightened bird . . . not the earth unzipped

but the way I could see my own fingers and hear
myself scream as the blossom incinerated.

And though nothing could chasten
the plunge, this man
adamant as a knife easing into

the humblest crevice, I found myself at
the center of a calm so pure, it was hate.

The mystery is, you can eat fear
before fear eats you,

you can live beyond dying—
and become a queen
whom nothing surprises.

The question is why, why if this daughter had been abducted against her will did she eat those pomegranate seeds? Why would she stop? I began writing this book without knowing the answer to that question—being truly baffled by it. As I began to

write my way into this nightmare of a story, I realized there was another alternative that like all parables, there are many different ways that you can approach it. Perhaps the reason that she wandered away from the groups was the she was trying literally to get away. That it could be a parable also for just growing up. Maybe she ate those pomegranate seeds because part of her wanted to stay there. This poem is called "Wiederkehr," which is German for return.

Wiederkehr

He only wanted me for happiness:
to walk in air
and not think so much,
to watch the smile
begun in his eyes
end on the lips
his eyes caressed.
He merely hoped, in darkness, to smell
rain; and though he saw how still
I sat to hold the rain untouched
inside me, he never asked
if I would stay. Which is why,
when the choice appeared,
I reached for it.

Another modern version here, of exactly that moment, the moment of eating of the seeds, in this case, the underworld is Paris. It's not what I think of Paris, but I always thought that if a mother were going after her daughter and her daughter were living with a mediocre artist, let's say in Paris, and she was trying to convince her to come back, that Paris would be one equivalent of hell for that mother. So here we have a modern version, the poem is called, "The Bistro Styx." The mother is speaking.

She was thinner, with a mannered gauntness
as she paused just inside the double
glass doors to survey the room, silvery cape
billowing dramatically behind her. *What's this,*

I thought, lifting a hand until
she nodded and started across the parquet;
that's when I saw she was dressed all in gray,
from a kittenish cashmere skirt and cowl

down to the graphite signature of her shoes.
"Sorry I'm late," she panted, though
she wasn't, sliding into the chair, her cape

tossed off in a shudder of brushed steel.
We kissed. Then I leaned back to peruse
my blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole.

"How's business?" I asked, and hazarded
a motherly smile to keep from crying out:
Are you content to conduct your life
as a cliché and, what's worse,

an anachronism, the brooding artist's demimonde?
Near the rue Princesse they had opened
a gallery *cum* souvenir shop which featured
fuzzy off-color Monets next to his acrylics, no doubt,

plus beared African drums and the occasional miniature
gargoyle from Notre Dame the Great Artist had
carved at breakfast with a pocket knife.

"Tourists love us. The Parisians, of course"--
she blushed--"are amused, though not without
a certain admiration . . ."

The Chateaubriand

arrived on a bone-white plate, smug and absolute
in its fragrant crust, a black plug steaming
like the heart plucked from the chest of a worthy enemy;
one touch with her fork sent pink juices streaming.

"Admiration for what?" Wine, a bloody
Pinot Noir, brought color to her cheeks. "Why,
the aplomb with which we've managed
to support our Art"--meaning he'd convinced

her to pose nude for his appalling canvases,
faintly futuristic landscapes strewn
with car wrecks and bodies being chewed

by rabid cocker spaniels. "I'd like to come by
the studio," I ventured, "and see the new stuff."
"Yes, if you wish . . ." A delicate rebuff

before the warning: "He dresses all
in black now. Me, he drapes in blues and carmine--
and even though I think it's kinda cute,
in company I tend toward more muted shades."

She paused and had the grace
to drop her eyes. She did look ravishing,
spookily insubstantial, a lipstick ghost on tissue,
or as if one stood on a fifth-floor terrace

peering through a fringe of rain at Paris'
dreaming chimney pots, each sooty issue
wobbling skyward in an ecstatic oracular spiral.

"And he never thinks of food. I wish
I didn't have to plead with him to eat. . . ." Fruit
and cheese appeared, arrayed on leaf-green dishes.

I stuck with café crème. "This Camembert's
so ripe," she joked, "it's practically grown hair,"
mucking a golden glob complete with parsley sprig
onto a heel of bread. Nothing seemed to fill

her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear,
speared each tear-shaped lavalier
and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth.
Nowhere the bright tufted fields, weighted

vines and sun poured down out of the south.
"But are you happy?" Fearing, I whispered it
quickly. "What? You know, Mother"--

she bit into the starry rose of a fig--
"one really should try the fruit here."
I've lost her, I thought, and called for the bill.

Thank you. I think what I'll do is end with one new poem. A kind of an upbeat
note, I think. I've been writing these short lyrics almost thinking that they could be sung.
Let me end with this one which is called "Dawn Revisited."

Imagine you wake up
with a second chance: The blue jay
hawks his pretty wares
and the oak still stands, spreading
glorious shade. If you don't look back,

the future never happens.
How good to rise in sunlight,
in the prodigal smell of biscuits—

eggs and sausage on the grill.
The whole sky is yours

to write on, blown open
like a blank page. Come on,
shake a leg! You'll never know
who's down there, frying those eggs,
if you don't get up and see.

Thank you very much.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08