



# ANTHONY HECHT

S E L E C T E D P O E M S

A NEW SELECTION EDITED BY J. D. MCCLATCHY

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# Anthony Hecht

## Selected Poems

*Edited by J. D. McClatchy*



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Introduction, notes, chronology, and suggested further reading

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## *Introduction*

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For every poet there are defining experiences: certain people and books, certain losses and sorrows, certain landscapes and themes that are compulsively revisited over the course of a career. One theorist would claim such experiences are unconscious, happen in one's earliest years, and haunt the writer ever after. A second theorist would insist there are inherent mythic patterns that shape a life, and the art made from that life. A third critic would contend that every writer struggles with his literary ancestors, desperately trying to overwrite them. Theories abound, and are always too narrow to contain the full scope of a poet's art. Still, any reader of Anthony Hecht's poems will sense that, for all their variety, they circle a few crucial preoccupations, and use their technical skill to speak about these in an especially charged and commanding manner.

An imaginary map of Hecht's sensibility would most certainly note how, as it were, Germany and Italy border each other. His experiences as a combatant in World War II and later as a sojourner in Italy were central for Hecht as landscapes over which deeper issues were deployed. When he deals with the Holocaust—as in “Rites and Ceremonies” or “Persistences” or “The Book of Yolek”—it is in a ritualistic or subdued manner that will allow him to address horrifying matters. And when he refers to his time in combat, it is usually a memory of utter isolation—far removed from the carnage and chaos, noise and camaraderie of actual warfare. In “Still Life,” the poet is describing a lakeside just at dawn, and after talk of liquid leafage and glittering cobwebs, the poem pauses:

Why does this so much stir me, like a code

Or muffled intimation

---

Of purposes and preordained events?  
It knows me, and I recognize its mode  
Of cautionary, spring-tight hesitation,  
This silence so impacted and intense.

As in a water-surface I behold  
The first, soft, peach decree  
Of light, its pale, inaudible commands.  
I stand beneath a pine-tree in the cold,  
Just before dawn, somewhere in Germany,  
A cold, wet Garand rifle in my hands.

We know from other poems that this scene strangely duplicates scenes described from Hecht's childhood, where we find the lonely boy staring blankly out of the window, or standing paralyzed in front of a hill in winter. In other words, his wartime memories—of sickening fear or helplessness—serve to focus earlier, deeper memories, and the way they each recall and reinforce the other is part of the force of a Hecht poem. Even more telling is the contrast between such memories and the unexpected places they recur. In "A Hill," for instance, standing in a busy Italian piazza, the speaker is suddenly stricken with a memory of childhood. The extravagance of language used to describe the scene yields suddenly to a flat, stark speech. How often the gilded, luxuriant aspects of Italian landscape, architecture, or high art are lovingly rendered, only to be pulled like a sumptuous rug from under our feet. "My instinct for contrast and dialectic," he once explained to an interviewer, "is almost always at work, as a dramatic element of the poem, so that any flamboyance is likely to be confronted or opposed by counter-force directness, elemental grit." These counter-forces were at work throughout his career, and give his poems their dramatic momentum and fascination. Description and psychology pull against each other, finely observed textures can be suddenly ripped through like a stage backdrop. The diction in any one poem will veer giddily from high to low (in one poem



“Evangelist” is rhymed with “pissed”).

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“In each art,” the poet Richard Wilbur has written, “the difficulty of the form is a substitute for the difficulty of direct apprehension and expression of the object.” This accounts for the seeming contradiction between the subjects and shapes of many of Hecht’s poems. Each of his books is stalked by occasions of madness, paranoia, hallucination, and dream; there are exile, plague, miscarriage, murder, genocide. Yet they are dramatized in stanzas of intricate construction and often grandiloquent diction. Form is meant as the long looking-glass, as a way of seeing the detail, the quaking heart, in the very midst of the muddle. He wants simultaneously to see the world and tell the truth. If Keats’s urn is to be believed, and beauty is the whole truth, then the ravishingly beautiful stanzas of a Hecht poem—so intricately plotted, so lavishly detailed, their rhythms such that form and speech are a single pulse—would be truth enough. But a Hecht poem has always been something more. His is a *responsible* art, an art that responds to history, to political and domestic tragedies with an awareness of personal accountability. The *beauty* of a Hecht poem, the very skill by which its material is revealed, often throws into an even stronger, more pathetic light the desolation of the human condition that is his subject. His poems are most moving when they offer their art to their subjects, when the poet finds words for the unspeakable, gives images and dramatic life to the inarticulate—a servant girl or battered child, a young woman dying of leukemia or a concentration-camp internee. The words and images he offers them, of course, enable the reader to share both the victim’s forlorn aloneness and the poet’s speculative freedom, both the baffled suffering of humankind and the consoling wonder of language.

The voice in Hecht’s poems is like none other. Even so, he learned to speak in his very individual way by listening closely to

earlier poets. Among his immediate forebears, two poets were crucial influences. One was T. S. Eliot, whose example helped shape not just Hecht's style but his sensibility, which, like Eliot's, is marked by a melancholy in the gloom of collapsed beliefs, occasionally startled by flashing glimpses of redemption. The other poet who helped Hecht toward his characteristic tone of voice was W. H. Auden, whose confidence in the mind's capacities resulted in a brilliant lexicon, a restless invention, an intellectual rigor, and an inclusive gaze. At the heart of both these poets' achievement is their way of confronting a loneliness of spirit that can be a curse or a blessing but is an inevitable concomitant of human life. Hecht's voice—whether we know it is a dramatic character's or presume it is his own—echoes that same loneliness: words piled against a vacancy, longing pitched against despair. Eliot and Auden were what we would call mid-Atlantic poets, straddling the two cultures, British and American. But both looked primarily to older English poets as muses, and Hecht did too. George Herbert, John Milton, and above all William Shakespeare were the poets he most admired, and each had a different distinction. Hecht liked Herbert's calm perfection of phrasing, Milton's architectonic rhetoric, and Shakespeare's breathtaking imagery and dramatic virtuosity. What all these poets share, of course, is the Biblical language that is the true heartbeat of traditional English poetry. In Hecht's work, the cadences and gravity of the King James Bible are everywhere. The dark visions of certain Old Testament books—Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job—as well as the raptures of the Psalms and the narrative power of Matthew are intrinsic to his imagination.

To say that Anthony Hecht was a literary poet is only to claim for him what is important to every great poet. His style is a *composed* one, enriched by allusions to history and the literature of the past that he expects the reader to take notice of because the

serve as an echo chamber within which his own poems' themes gather weight and resonance. In the same way, he often turned to traditional verse forms—sonnet, sestina, villanelle, and their kin—in part to pledge his allegiance to the continuity of English poetry. Any account of this aspect of his work, of course, implicates the far larger ambitions of the making and meanings of a poem. Hecht's "Peripeteia" memorably bows to this when a poem is described as "Governed by laws that stand for other laws, / Both of which aim through kindred disciplines, / At the soul's knowledge and habiliment." The rules of prosody, in other words, are moral principles meant finally to reveal the structure of human dilemma and sympathies. Verse forms are one attempt at that. The sonnet template or the villanelle's refrains are ways to shape the music of speech, and Hecht uses both received and invented forms as bracing structures inside which an argument unfolds. If the tone of his lines seems elevated, that is because all poetry is language heightened, and should sound out of the ordinary. If the texture seems complex, that is because he is acutely sensitive to the harmonies and dissonances of the line, to the syncopation of rhythms, to the way rhymes will manipulate and satisfy our expectations. "A serious and durable work of art, whatever its medium," he once wrote, "will make the sort of demands upon us that invite repeated experiences that will fail to exhaust the work. With each fresh reading, a Hecht poem reveals itself to be a prism of new facets mirroring new depths.

His books first appeared after long intervals but had an immediate authority. How did they change over the decades? *Summoning of Stones* was published in 1954, when the poet was thirty-one years old. That his poems had been appearing in literary journals for seven years before the book came out is a sign of how fastidious he was about making a formal debut. He had long since sought out the teachers—John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate—h

thought would encourage the best in him, and his apprenticeship coincided with the heyday of New Criticism, a way of reading and writing poetry that favored irony, wit, dexterity, constraint, and subtlety. Those qualities are all on display in his first book. There is a gallantry of formal design, and an almost baroque excess of poetic language and learning. There are few short poems, because from the start Hecht preferred to dramatize, digress, and slowly divulge. His motifs—a fountain, say, or a cat—are *moving* objects in an intricate balance or a controlled disorder. And lurking behind most of the poems is a sense of mortality, the flesh as the skeleton's carnival mask.

When *The Hard Hours* appeared thirteen years later, a clutch of poems from *A Summoning of Stones* was reprinted at the end of the new collection, but the effect was less to remember an earlier achievement than to emphasize what an advance the new poem represented. The book opens with "A Hill," one of his strongest poems, an eerie account of the long cold arm of trauma as it reaches into a man's life. The contrasting panels of this poem—sunlit clarity and a chilling shadow—are everywhere echoed in the rest of the book, but Hecht's desire here is not merely to depict them but to understand their dynamics. His style has drawn close to speech, and the dramatic appeal of the poems is more skillfully managed. The tone can be wry, but the gravity is more fierce and compelling. Other poems in the book—"Third Avenue in Sunlight," say, or "Behold the Lilies of the Field"—explore the borders of sanity, linking the history of humankind with the individual psyche, each an emblem of the other. Still other poems return to feelings elicited by his wartime experiences in Europe. " 'More Light! More Light!' " surely ranks with Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" as one of the most disquieting poems of the century, their portraits of war all the more terrible for the restraint of the telling. The centerpiece of *The Hard Hours* is another poem

that comes from the darkest hours in Hecht's own life, his encounter as a battle-weary infantryman with the German concentration camps at the end of World War II. "Rites and Ceremonies" is unlike any other Hecht poem, and the reader is aware of the wrenching emotional cost to the poet as he put the pieces together: suffering, prayer, brutality, despair. Rather than the steady voice of other Hecht poems, this poem is a collage of Biblical and liturgical fragments juxtaposed with what seem black-and-white glimpses of a documentary film about man's inhumanity to man.

After a ten-year silence, two books appeared in quick succession: *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1977) and *The Venetian Vespers* (1979) and can be read together as the next stage of his poetic development. Now, his dramatic instincts dominate, and there is a remarkable new amplitude to these books, a hovering sympathy with thwarted desire. His tone can be sadly ironic, as in the chambermaid's tale that gives "The Grapes" its pathos; or it can be more tautly heartbreaking, as in the masterful "Coming Home," about the English pastoral poet John Clare's attempted escape from a mental asylum, an escape that only leads him into a deeper confusion and loss. The profound sense of gratified love that animates "Peripeteia" is the obverse of the delusion and repressed rage that drive "Green: An Epistle." Hecht's virtuosity and range are at their best in these books. The longer narrative poems that anchor *The Venetian Vespers* provide exquisite evidence of this judgment. The title poem especially is a grand monologue, man at the end of his tether, the story of an empty life haunted by an unhappy childhood (Hecht himself once wrote that "for many complicated reasons my childhood was a rather bitter and lonely one") and by a glistening, grimy, glorious beauty that swirls about him in a fabled city of wavering reflections.

His final three books are a closing chapter. *The Transparent Man*

includes two long poems—one of them, the spooky “See Naples and Die,” about a collapsing marriage, is included here—and, in the book’s title poem, one of his most eloquent dramatic monologues. But in general the poems in these collections are shorter, pungent variations on familiar themes. Hecht returns to an abiding source of inspiration, the masterpieces of the painter’s art. The idiom of composition and color always attracted him, and to listen in as he describes the effects of the brush is an enlightening privilege. Also, whether translating a chorus by the old Sophocles or revisiting episodes in the Bible, he writes here from the perspective of age. There is an achieved wisdom to many of these later poems, condensed rather than garrulous, sometimes sardonic, sometimes severe. “The Presumptions of Death” is a witty set of assumptions, the poet putting Death through his paces in order to dramatize the roles *we* play seeking to avoid the inevitable. Yet there is never the sense of lines engraved in granite. His wit and curiosity, the warmth of his affections, and the chiaroscuro rendering of his scenes, his ability to startle—all these remain. The late poems are quieter, reconciled, more accepting, and in poems like “Devotions of a Painter,” “Prospects,” “Proust on Skates,” “Late Afternoon,” and “The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee,” the redemptive power of beauty is celebrated with renewed urgency.

For over half a century, poets and readers alike have turned to these books for their technical mastery, their intellectual power, and the plenitude of their emotion. If I had to single out one of his literary achievements that I value most, it would be his truth-telling—his steady, clear-eyed confrontation with the facts of our lives. I would not want to underestimate the salty slang, the satirical bite, or the ingenious wit of some of his poems. But I return with gratitude to that strain in Hecht’s work, so rare in contemporary poetry, that I can only call *noble*—high, important matters dealt

with in a manner that is contained, dignified, and open, full of  
feeling: life looked at from the vantage of spirit.

*J. D. McClatchy*

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*from* **A SUMMONING OF STONES**

---



# DOUBLE SONNET

---

recall everything, but more than all,  
words being nothing now, an ease that ever  
remembers her to my unfailing fever,  
now she came forward to me, letting fall  
implight upon her dress till every small  
motion made visible seemed no mere endeavor  
of body to articulate its offer,  
but more a grace won by the way from all  
striving in what is difficult, from all  
losses, so that she moved but to discover  
practice of the blood, as the gulls hover,  
tinged with their life, above the harbor wall,  
aching inflected silence in the tall  
tower with a tilt of mastery and quiver  
against the light, as the light fell to favor  
her coming forth; this chiefly I recall.

is a part of pride, guiding the hand  
to the piano in the splash and passage  
of sacred dolphins, making numbers human  
of sheer extravagance that can command  
Pythagorean heavens to spell their message  
of some unlooked-for peace, out of the common;  
making no thought at all that man and woman,  
lost in the trance of lamplight, felt the presage  
of the unbidden terror and bone hand  
of gracelessness, and the unspoken omen  
that yet shall render all, by its first usage,  
speechless, inept, and totally unmanned.

# JAPAN

---

was a miniature country once  
by my imagination; Home of the Short,  
and also the academy of stunts  
    Where acrobats are taught  
The famous secrets of the trade:  
To cycle in the big parade  
while spinning plates upon their parasols,  
and somersaults that do not touch the ground,  
    Or tossing seven balls  
Most Celestial Order round and round.

child's quick sense of the ingenious stamped  
on their invention: toys I used to get  
    Christmastime, or the peculiar, cramped  
    Look of their alphabet.  
Fragile and easily destroyed,  
Those little boats of celluloid  
given by camphor round the bathroom sink,  
and delicate the folded paper prize  
    Which, dropped into a drink  
of water, grew up right before your eyes.

Now when we reached them it was with a sense  
sharpened for treachery compounding in their brains  
like mating weasels; our Intelligence  
    Said: The Black Dragon reigns  
Secretly under yellow skin,  
Deeper than dyes of atabrine  
and deadlier. The War Department said:  
Remember you are Americans; forsake  
    The wounded and the dead  
at your own cost; remember Pearl and Wake.

and yet they bowed us in with ceremony,  
told us what brands of Sake were the best,  
explained their agriculture in a phony  
    Dialect of the West,

Meant vaguely to be understood  
As a shy sign of brotherhood

the old human bondage to the facts  
day-to-day existence. And like ants,  
    Signalling tiny pacts  
with their antennae, they would wave their hands.

last we came to see them not as glib  
talkers of tightropes, worshippers of carp,  
or yet a species out of Adam's rib  
    Meant to preserve its warp  
In Cain's own image. They had learned  
That their tough eye-born goddess burned  
    adoring fingers. They were very poor.  
The holy mountain was not moved to speak.  
    Wind at the paper door  
    Offered them snow out of its hollow peak.

human endeavor clumsily betrays  
humanity. Their excrement served in this;  
or, planting rice in water, they would raise  
    Schistosomiasis  
Japonica, that enters through  
The pores into the avenue  
of orbit of the blood, where it may foil  
the heart and kill, or settle in the brain.  
    This fruit of their nightsoil  
    Thrives in the skull, where it is called insane.

Now the quaint early image of Japan  
that was so charming to me as a child  
seems like a bright design upon a fan,  
    Of water rushing wild  
On rocks that can be folded up,  
A river which the wrist can stop  
with a neat flip, revealing merely sticks  
and silk of what had been a fan before,  
    And like such winning tricks,  
    shall be buried in excelsior.

# SAMUEL SEWALL

---

Samuel Sewall, in a world of wigs,  
outed opinion in his personal hair;  
For foppery he gave not any figs,  
But in his right and honor took the air.

Thus in his naked style, though well attired,  
He went forth in the city, or paid court  
To Madam Winthrop, whom he much admired,  
Most godly, but yet liberal with the port.

And all the town admired for two full years  
His excellent address, his gifts of fruit,  
For gracious ways and delicate white ears,  
Which held the course of nature absolute.

But yet she bade him suffer a peruke,  
That One be not distinguished from the All";  
Delivered of herself this stern rebuke  
Phrased in the resonant language of St. Paul.

"Madam," he answered her, "I have a Friend  
Which furnishes me with hair out of His strength,  
And He requires only I attend  
Unto His charity and to its length."

And all the town was witness to his trust:  
On Monday he walked out with the Widow Gibbs,  
A pious lady of charm and notable bust,  
Whose heart beat tolerably beneath her ribs.

On Saturday he wrote proposing marriage,  
Which closed, imploring that she be not cruel,  
"Your favorable answer will oblige,  
I am, your humble servant, Samuel Sewall."

# A POEM FOR JULIA

---

held in her hand of “almost flawless skin”  
small sprig of Sweet William as a badge  
of beauty, and the region of her nose  
seemed to be made so delicate and thin,  
that the light of the sun might touch the cartilage  
with numerous golden tones and hints of rose  
but she turned to the window now to smell  
the lilacs and the undulant green lawn,  
as if a golf course, where a haze revealed  
the sheep, distinguished each with a separate bell,  
grazing and moping near the neighbor field  
where all the clover-seeking bees were gone,  
it stood in modesty in the full sight  
of Memling, whose accomplished busy hand  
rendered this wimpled lady in such white  
tinted beauty, that she seems to stand  
as gently to our present gaze  
as she had stood there in her breathing days.

Seeing this painting, I am put in mind  
of many a freakish harridan and clown  
who by their native clumsiness or fate  
won for themselves astonishing renown  
and stand amongst us even to this date  
since art and history were so inclined:  
there, in a generous Italian scene,  
a pimply, chinless shepherd, whose rough thought  
of his customary labor lead the ram  
to his sheep for profit and for sport,  
to provide their ungainly pleasure with obscene  
birth at the comedy of sire and dam  
all he has grossly married every ewe—  
this shepherd, in a mangy cap of fur,  
stands at the window still regarding her,  
that only lady, if the Pope speaks true,  
who with a grace more than we understand  
is of her portion with a flawless hand.

And once a chattering agent of Pope Paul,  
small, foul-minded clergyman, stood by

to watch the aging Michelangelo  
at his *Last Judgment* on the papal wall,  
and muttered thereupon that to his eye  
it was a lewd and most indecent show  
of nakedness, not for a sacred place,  
but fitted to whorehouse or to public bath;  
which the painter promptly drew his face  
horribly gripped, his face a fist of pain,  
amongst those fixed in God's eternal wrath,  
and when the fool made motion to complain  
he earned this solemn judgment of the Pope:  
"Had art set you on Purgatory's Mount  
when had I done my utmost for your hope,  
at Hell's fierce immolation takes no count  
of offices and prayers, for as you know,  
from that place *nulla est redemptio*."

and I recall certain ambassadors,  
clad in ermine and with vests of mail,  
who came their way into the town of Prague  
announced by horns, as history tells the tale,  
to seek avoidances of future wars  
and try the meaning of the Decalogue,  
at which whispers went about against their names.  
and so it happened that a courtier-wit,  
advocating their cause with an intemperate might,  
ascended his castle's vantage, and made claims  
upon their courtesy to visit it,  
and having brought them to that famous height  
to witness the whole streamed and timbered view  
of his ancestral property, and smell  
of his fine ancestral air, he pushed them through  
the open-standing window, whence they fell,  
and, in a manner worthy to be sung,  
fell thirty feet into a pile of dung.

How many poets, with profoundest breath,  
have set their ladies up to spite the worm,  
that pale mistress or high-busted bawd  
would smile and spit into the eye of death  
and dance into our midst all fleshed and firm  
despite she was most perishably flawed?  
The lasts, but not in her own body's right,  
or do we love her for her endless poise.

l of her beauty has become a part  
f neighboring beauty, and what could excite  
gh expectations among hopeful boys  
ow leaves her to the nunnery of art.  
nd yet a searching discipline can keep  
at eye still clear, as though in spite of Hell,  
 that she seems as innocent as sheep  
here they still graze, denuded of their smell,  
here fool still writhes upon the chapel wall,  
shepherd stares, ambassadors still fall.

lam and Eve knew such perfection once,  
od's finger in the cloud, and on the ground  
othing but springtime, nothing else at all.  
it in our fallen state where the blood hunts  
or blood, and rises at the hunting sound,  
hat do we know of lasting since the fall?  
ho has not, in the oil and heat of youth,  
ought of the flourishing of the almond tree,  
e grasshopper, and the failing of desire,  
nd thought his tongue might pierce the secrecy  
f the six-pointed starlight, and might choir  
secret-voweled, unutterable truth?  
e heart is ramified with an old force  
utlingering the blood, out of the sway  
f its own fleshy trap) that finds its source  
ep in the phosphorous waters of the bay,  
t in the wind, or pointing cedar tree,  
t its own ramified complexity.

# CHRISTMAS IS COMING

---

Darkness is for the poor, and thorough cold,  
they go wandering the hills at night,  
waiting for enemies. Winter locks the lake;  
the rocks are harder for it. What was grass  
fossilized and brittle; it can hurt,  
being a torture to the kneeling knee,  
and in the general pain of cold, it sticks  
to particular pain where crawling is required.

*Christmas is coming. The goose is getting fat.  
Please put a penny in the Old Man's hat.*

Where is the warmth of blood? The enemy  
has ears that can hear clearly in the cold,  
can hear the shattering of fossil grass,  
can hear the stiff cloth rub against itself,  
making a sound. Where is the blood? It lies  
locked in the limbs of some poor animal  
in a diaspora of crimson ice.  
The skin freezes to metal. One must crawl  
quietly in the dark. Where is the warmth?  
The lamb has yielded up its fleece and warmth  
and woolly life, but who shall taste of it?  
Where on the ground one cannot see the stars.  
The lamb is killed. *The goose is getting fat.*  
The wind blows steadily against the trees,  
and somewhere in the blackness they are black.  
In crawling one encounters bits of string,  
pieces of foil left by the enemy.  
(The rifle takes its temper from the cold.)  
Where is the pain? The sense has frozen up,  
and fingers cannot recognize the grass,  
cannot distinguish their own character,  
being blind with cold, being stiffened by the cold;  
must find out thistles to remember pain.  
Step to the frozen ground or else be killed.  
In crawling one encounters in the dark  
the frosty carcasses of birds, their feet  
and wings all glazed. And still we crawl to learn  
where pain was lost, how to recover pain.



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