Classic Poetry Series

Anthony Evan Hecht

- poems -

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Anthony Evan Hecht (16 January, 1923 – 20 October, 2004)

Anthony Evan Hecht was an American poet. His work combined a deep interest in form with a passionate desire to confront the horrors of 20th century history, with the Second World War, in which he fought, and the Holocaust being recurrent themes in his work.

Early Years

Hecht was born in New York City to German-Jewish parents. He was educated at various schools in the city - he was a classmate of Jack Kerouac at one point - but showed no great academic ability, something he would later refer to as "conspicuous." However, as a freshman English student at Bard College in New York he discovered the works of Stevens,Auden, <a ref="http://poemhunter.com/t-s-eliot/">Eliot<a/>, and Dylan Thomas. It was at this point that he decided he would become a poet. Hecht's parents were not happy at his plans and tried to discourage them; even getting family friend Rob, better known as Dr. Seuss, to attempt to dissuade him.

In 1944, upon completing his final year at Bard, Hecht was drafted into the 97th Infantry Division and was sent to the battlefields in Europe. He saw a great deal of combat in Germany, France, and Czechoslovakia. However, his most significant experience occurred on April 23 1945. On this day Hecht's division helped liberate Flossenbürg concentration camp. Hecht was ordered to interview French prisoners in the hope of gathering evidence on the camp's commanders. Years later, Hecht said of this experience, "The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking."

Career

After the war ended, Hecht took advantage of the G.I. bill to study under the poet-critic John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College, Ohio. Here he came into contact with fellow poets such as Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Allen Tate. He later received his master's degree from Columbia University. Hecht also attended the University of Iowa.

Hecht released his first collection, A Summoning of Stones, in 1954. In this

work his mastery of a wide range of poetic forms were clear as was his awareness of the forces of history, which he had seen first hand. Even at this stage Hecht's poetry was often compared with that of Auden, with whom Hecht had become friends in 1951 during a holiday on the Italian island of Ischia, where Auden spent each summer. In 1993 Hecht published, The Hidden Law, a critical reading of Auden's body of work. During his career Hecht won many fans, and prizes, including the Prix de Rome in 1951 and the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his second work The Hard Hours. It was within this volume that Hecht first addressed his own experiences of World War II - memories that had caused him to have a nervous breakdown in 1959. Hecht spent three months in hospital following his breakdown, although he was spared electric shock therapy, unlike Sylvia Plath, whom he had encountered while teaching at Smith College.

Hecht's main source of income was as a teacher of poetry, most notably at the University of Rochester where he taught from 1967 to 1985. He also spent varying lengths of time teaching at other notable institutions such as Smith, Bard, Harvard, Georgetown, and Yale. Between 1982 and 1984, he held the esteemed position of Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Hecht won a number of notable literary awards including: the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (for the volume The Hard Hours), the 1983 Bollingen Prize, the 1988 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the 1997 Wallace Stevens Award, the 1999/2000 Frost Medal, and the Tanning Prize.

He is buried at the cemetery at Bard College.

Eserleri:

Poetry
A Summoning of Stones (1954)
The Hard Hours (1967)
Millions of Strange Shadows (1977)
The Venetian Vespers (1979)
The Transparent Man (1990)
Flight Among the Tombs (1998)
The Darkness and the Light (2001)
More Light! More Light! (Poem)
Translations
Aeschylus's Seven Against Thebes (1973) (with Helen Bacon)
Other Works
Obbligati: Essays in Criticism (1986)
The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W. H. Auden (1993)
On the Laws of the Poetic Art (1995)
Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry (2003)

A Hill

In Italy, where this sort of thing can occur,
I had a vision once - though you understand
It was nothing at all like Dante's, or the visions of saints,
And perhaps not a vision at all. I was with some friends,
Picking my way through a warm sunlit piazza
In the early morning. A clear fretwork of shadows
From huge umbrellas littered the pavement and made
A sort of lucent shallows in which was moored
A small navy of carts. Books, coins, old maps,
Cheap landscapes and ugly religious prints
Were all on sale. The colors and noise
Like the flying hands were gestures of exultation,
So that even the bargaining
Rose to the ear like a voluble godliness.
And then, where it happened, the noises suddenly stopped,
And it got darker; pushcarts and people dissolved
And even the great Farnese Palace itself
Was gone, for all its marble; in its place
Was a hill, mole-colored and bare. It was very cold,
Close to freezing, with a promise of snow.
The trees were like old ironwork gathered for scrap
Outside a factory wall. There was no wind,
And the only sound for a while was the little click
Of ice as it broke in the mud under my feet.
I saw a piece of ribbon snagged on a hedge,
But no other sign of life. And then I heard
What seemed the crack of a rifle. A hunter, I guessed;
At least I was not alone. But just after that
Came the soft and papery crash
Of a great branch somewhere unseen falling to earth.

And that was all, except for the cold and silence
That promised to last forever, like the hill.

Then prices came through, and fingers, and I was restored
To the sunlight and my friends. But for more than a week
I was scared by the plain bitterness of what I had seen.
All this happened about ten years ago,
And it hasn't troubled me since, but at last, today,
I remembered that hill; it lies just to the left
Of the road north of Poughkeepsie; and as a boy
I stood before it for hours in wintertime.

Anthony Evan Hecht

A Letter

I have been wondering
What you are thinking about, and by now suppose
It is certainly not me.
But the crocus is up, and the lark, and the blundering
Blood knows what it knows.
It talks to itself all night, like a sliding moonlit sea.

Of course, it is talking of you.
At dawn, where the ocean has netted its catch of lights,
The sun plants one lithe foot
On that spill of mirrors, but the blood goes worming through
Its warm Arabian nights,
Naming your pounding name again in the dark heart-root.

Who shall, of course, be nameless.
Anyway, I should want you to know I have done my best,
As I'm sure you have, too.
Others are bound to us, the gentle and blameless
Whose names are not confessed
In the ceaseless palaver. My dearest, the clear unquaried blue

Of those depths is all but blinding.
You may remember that once you brought my boys
Two little woolly birds.
Yesterday the older one asked for you upon finding
Your thrush among his toys.
And the tides welled about me, and I could find no words.

There is not much else to tell.
One tries one's best to continue as before,
Doing some little good.
But I would have you know that all is not well
With a man dead set to ignore
The endless repetitions of his own murmurous blood.

Anthony Evan Hecht

After The Rain [for W. D. Snodgrass]

The barbed-wire fences rust
As their cedar uprights blacken
After a night of rain.
Some early, innocent lust
Gets me outdoors to smell
The teasle, the pelted bracken,
The cold, mossed-over well,
Rank with its iron chain,

And takes me off for a stroll.
Wetness has taken over.
From drain and creeper twine
It's runnelled and trenched and edged
A pebbled serpentine
Secretly, as though pledged
To attain a difficult goal
And join some important river.

The air is a smear of ashes
With a cool taste of coins.
Stiff among misty washes,
The trees are as black as wicks,
Silent, detached and old.
A pallor undermines
Some damp and swollen sticks.
The woods are rich with mould.

How even and pure this light!
All things stand on their own,
Equal and shadowless,
In a world gone pale and neuter,
Yet riddled with fresh delight.
The heart of every stone
Conceals a toad, and the grass
Shines with a douse of pewter.

Somewhere a branch rustles
With the life of squirrels or birds,
Some life that is quick and right.
This queer, delicious bareness,
This plain, uniform light,
In which both elms and thistles,
Grass, boulders, even words,
Speak for a Spartan fairness,

Might, as I think it over,
Speak in a form of signs,

If only one could know
All of its hidden tricks,
Saying that I must go
With a cool taste of coins
To join some important river,
Some damp and swollen Styx.

Yet what puzzles me the most
Is my unwavering taste
For these dim, weathery ghosts,
And how, from the very first,
An early, innocent lust
Delighted in such wastes,
Sought with a reckless thirst
A light so pure and just.

Anthony Evan Hecht

An Old Malediction

What well-heeled knuckle-head, straight from the unisex
Hairstylist and bathed in Russian Leather,
Dallies with you these late summer days, Pyrrha,
In your expensive sublet? For whom do you
Slip into something simple by, say, Gucci?
The more fool he who has mapped out for himself
The saline latitudes of incontinent grief.
Dazzled though he be, poor dope, by the golden looks
Your locks fetched up out of a bottle of Clairol,
He will know that the wind changes, the smooth sailing
Is done for, when the breakers wallop him broadside,
When he’s rudderless, dismasted, thoroughly swamped
In that mindless rip-tide that got the best of me
Once, when I ventured on your deeps, Piranha.

(FREELY FROM HORACE)

Anthony Evan Hecht

Birdwatchers Of America

It’s all very well to dream of a dove that saves,
Picasso’s or the Pope’s,
The one that annually coos in Our Lady’s ear
Half the world’s hopes,
And the other one that shall cunningly engineer
The retirement of all businessmen to their graves,
And when this is brought about
Make us the loving brothers of every lout—

But in our part of the country a false dusk
Lingers for hours; it steams
From the soaked hay, wades in the cloudy woods,
Engendering other dreams.
Formless and soft beyond the fence it broods
Or rises as a faint and rotten musk
Out of a broken stalk.
There are some things of which we seldom talk;

For instance, the woman next door, whom we hear at night,
Claims that when she was small
She found a man stone dead near the cedar trees
After the first snowfall.
The air was clear. He seemed in ultimate peace
Except that he had no eyes. Rigid and bright
Upon the forehead, furred
With a light frost, crouched an outrageous bird.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Chorus From Oedipus At Colonos

What is unwisdom but the lusting after
Longevity: to be old and full of days!
For the vast and unremitting tide of years
Casts up to view more sorrowful things than joyful;
And as for pleasures, once beyond our prime,
They all drift out of reach, they are washed away.
And the same gaunt bailiff calls upon us all.
Summoning into Darkness, to those wards
Where is no music, dance, or marriage hymn
That soothes or gladdens. To the tenements of Death.

Not to be born is, past all yearning, best.
And second best is, having seen the light.
To return at once to deep oblivion.
When youth has gone, and the baseless dreams of youth,
What misery does not then jostle man's elbow,
Join him as a companion, share his bread?
Betrayal, envy, calumny and bloodshed
Move in on him, and finally Old Age--
Infirm, despised Old Age--joins in his ruin,
The crowning taunt of his indignities.

So is it with that man, not just with me.
He seems like a frail jetty facing North
Whose pilings the waves batter from all quarters;
From where the sun comes up, from where it sets,
From freezing boreal regions, from below,
A whole winter of miseries now assails him,
Thrashes his sides and breaks over his head.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Clair de Lune

Powder and scent and silence. The young dwarf
Shoulders his lute. The moon is Levantine.
It settles its pearl in every glass of wine.
Harlequin is already at the wharf.

The gallant is masked. A pressure of his thumb
Communicates cutaneous interest.
On the smooth upward swelling of a breast
A small black heart is fixed with spirit gum.

The thieving moment is now. Deftly, Pierrot
Exits, bearing a tray of fruits and coins.
A monkey, chained by his tiny loins,
Is taken aboard. They let their moorings go.

Silence. Even the god shall soon be gone.
Shadows, in their cool, tidal enterprise,
Have eaten away his muscular stone thighs.
Moonlight edges across the empty lawn.

Taffeta whispers. Someone is staring through
The white ribs of the pergola. She stares
At a small garnet pulse that disappears
Steadily seaward. Ah, my dear, it is you.

But you are not alone. A gardener goes
Through the bone light about the dark estate.
He bows, and, cheerfully inebriate,
Admires the lunar ashes of a rose,

And sings to his imaginary loves.
Wait. You can hear him. The familiar notes
Drift toward the old moss-bottomed fishing boats:
"Happy the heart that thinks of no removes."

This is your nightmare. Those cold hands are yours.
The pain in the drunken singing is your pain.
Morning will taste of bitterness again.
The heart turns to a stone, but it endures.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Curriculum Vitae

As though it were reluctant to be day,
.....Morning deploys a scale
.....Of rarities in gray,
And winter settles down in its chain-mail,

Victorious over legions of gold and red.
.....The smokey souls of stones,
.....Blunt pencillings of lead,
Pare down the world to glintless monotones

Of graveyard weather, vapors of a fen
.....We reckon through our pores.
.....Save for the garbage men,
Our children are the first ones out of doors.

Book-bagged and padded out, at mouth and nose
.....They manufacture ghosts,
.....George Washington's and Poe's,
Banquo's, the Union and Confederate hosts',

And are themselves the ghosts, file cabinet gray,
.....Of some departed us,
.....Signing our lives away
On ferned and parslied windows of a bus.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Death The Mexican Revolutionary

Wines of the great châteaux
Have been uncorked for you;
Come, take this terrace chair:
Examine the menu.
The view from here is such
As cannot find a match,
For even as you dine
You're so placed as to watch
Starvation in our streets
That gives your canapé
A more exquisite taste
By contrast, like the play
Of shadow and of light.
The misery of the poor
Appears, as on TV,
Set off by the allure
And glamour of the ads.
We recommend the quail,
Which you'd do well to eat
Before your powers fail,
For I inaugurate
A brand-new social order
Six cold, decisive feet
South of the border.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Eclogue Of The Shepherd And The Townie

SHEPHERD

Not the blue-fountained Florida hotel,
Bell-capped, bellevued, straight-jacketed and decked
With chromium palms and a fromage of moon,
Not goodnight chocolates, nor the soothing slide
Of huîtres and sentinel straight-up martinis,
Neither the yacht heraldic nor the stretch
Limos and pants, Swiss banks or Alpine stocks
Shall solace you, or quiet the long pain
Of cold ancestral disinheritance,
Severing your friendly commerce with the beasts,
Gone, lapsed, and cancelled, rendered obsolete
As the gonfalon of Bessarabia,
The shawm, the jitney, the equestrian order,
The dark daguerreotypes of Paradise.

TOWNIE

No humble folding cot, no steaming sty
Or sheep-dipped meadow now shall dignify
Your brute and sordid commerce with the beasts,
Scotch your flea-bitten bitterness or down
The voice that keeps repeating, "Up your Ars
Poetica, your earliest diapered dream
Of the long-gone Odd Fellows amity
Of bunny and scorpion, the entente cordiale
Of lamb and lion, the old nursery fraud
And droll Aesopic zoo in which the chatter
Of chimp and chaffinch, manticore and mouse,
Diverts us from all thought of entrecôtes,
Prime ribs and rashers, filets mignonnettes,
Provided for the paired pythons and jackals,
Off to their catered second honeymoons
On Noah's forty-day excursion cruise."

SHEPHERD

Call it. if this should please you, but a dream,
A bald, long-standing lie and mockery,
Yet it deserves better than your contempt.
Think also of that interstellar darkness,
Silence and desolation from which the Tempter,
Like a space capsule exiled into orbit,
Looks down on our green cabinet of peace,
A place classless and weaponless, without
Envy or fossil fuel or architecture.
Think of him as at dawn he views a snail
Traveling with blind caution up the spine

Of a frond asway with its little inching weight
In windless nods that deepen with assent
Till the ambler at last comes back to earth,
Leaving his route, as on the boughs of heaven,
Traced with a silver scrawl. The morning mist
Haunts all about that action till the sun
Makes of it a small glory, and the dew
Holds the whole scale of rainbow, the accord
Of stars and waters, luminously viewed
At the same time by water-walking spiders
That dimple a surface with their passages.
In the lewd Viennese catalogue of dreams
It's one of the few to speak of without shame.

TOWNIE

It is the dream of a shepherd king or child,
And is without all blemish except one:
That it supposes all virtue to stem
From pure simplicity. But many cures
Of body and of spirit are the fruit
Of cultivated thought. Kindness itself
Depends on what we call consideration.
Your fear of corruption is a fear of thought,
Therefore you would be thoughtless. Think again.
Consider the perfect hexagrams of snow,
Those broadcast emblems of divinity,
That prove in their unduplicable shapes
Insights of Thales and Pythagoras.
If you must dream, dream of the ratio
Of Nine to Six to Four Palladio used
To shape those rooms and chapels where the soul
Imagines itself blessed, and finds its peace
Even in chambers of the Malcontenta,
Those just proportions we hypostatize
Not as flat prairies but the City of God.

Anthony Evan Hecht

It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It.

Tonight my children hunch
Toward their Western, and are glad
As, with a Sunday punch,
The Good casts out the Bad.

And in their fairy tales
The warty giant and witch
Get sealed in doorless jails
And the match-girl strikes it rich.

I've made myself a drink.
The giant and witch are set
To bust out of the clink
When my children have gone to bed.

All frequencies are loud
With signals of despair;
In flash and morse they crowd
The rondure of the air.

For the wicked have grown strong,
Their numbers mock at death,
Their cow brings forth its young,
Their bull engendereth.

Their very fund of strength,
Satan, bestrides the globe;
He stalks its breadth and length
And finds out even Job.

Yet by quite other laws
My children make their case;
Half God, half Santa Claus,
But with my voice and face,

A hero comes to save
The poorman, beggarman, thief,
And make the world behave
And put an end to grief.

And that their sleep be sound
I say this childermas
Who could not, at one time,
Have saved them from the gas.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Late Afternoon: The Onslaught Of Love

For William and Emily Maxwell

At this time of day
One could hear the caulking irons sound
Against the hulls in the dockyard.
Tar smoke rose between trees
And large oily patches floated on the water,
Undulating unevenly
In the purple sunlight
Like the surfaces of Florentine bronze.

At this time of day
Sounds carried clearly
Through hot silences of fading daylight.
The weedy fields lay drowned
In odors of creosote and salt.
Richer than double-colored taffeta,
Oil floated in the harbor,
Amoeboid, iridescent, limp.
It called to mind the slender limbs
Of Donatello's David.

It was lovely and she was in love.
They had taken a covered boat to one of the islands.
The city sounds were faint in the distance:
Rattling of carriages, tumult of voices,
Yelping of dogs on the decks of barges.

At this time of day
Sunlight empurpled the world.
The poplars darkened in ranks
Like imperial servants.
Water lapped and lisped
In its native and quiet tongue.
Oakum was in the air and the scent of grasses.
There would be fried smelts and cherries and cream.
Nothing designed by Italian artisans
Would match this evening's perfection.
The puddled oil was a miracle of colors.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Lizards And Snakes

On the summer road that ran by our front porch
Lizards and snakes came out to sun.
It was hot as a stove out there, enough to scorch
A buzzard's foot. Still, it was fun
To lie in the dust and spy on them. Near but remote,
They snoozed in the carriage ruts, a smile
In the set of the jaw, a fierce pulse in the throat
Working away like Jack Doyle's after he'd run the mile.

Aunt Martha had an unfair prejudice
Against them (as well as being cold
Toward bats.) She was pretty inflexible in this,
Being a spinster and all, and old.
So we used to slip them into her knitting box.
In the evening she'd bring in things to mend
And a nice surprise would slide out from under the socks.
It broadened her life, as Joe said. Joe was my friend.

But we never did it again after the day
Of the big wind when you could hear the trees
Creak like rocking chairs. She was looking away
Off, and kept saying, "Sweet Jesus, please
Don't let him near me. He's as like as twins.
He can crack us like lice with his fingernail.
I can see him plain as a pikestaff. Look how he grins
And swings the scaly horror of his folded tail."

Anthony Evan Hecht

Lot's Wife

How simple the pleasures of those childhood days,
Simple but filled with exquisite satisfactions.
The iridescent labyrinth of the spider,
Its tethered tensor nest of polygons
Puffed by the breeze to a little bellying sail --
Merely observing this gave infinite pleasure.
The sound of rain. The gentle graphite veil
Of rain that makes of the world a steel engraving,
Full of soft fadings and faint distances.
The self-congratulations of a fly,
Rubbing its hands. The brown bicameral brain
Of a walnut. The smell of wax. The feel
Of sugar to the tongue: a delicious sand.
One understands immediately how Proust
Might cherish all such postage-stamp details.
Who can resist the charms of retrospection?

Anthony Evan Hecht

More Light! More Light!

For Heinrich Blucher and Hannah Arendt
Composed in the Tower before his execution
These moving verses, and being brought at that time
Painfully to the stake, submitted, declaring thus:
"I implore my God to witness that I have made no crime."

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,
The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite.
His legs were blistered sticks on which the black sap
Bubbled and burst as he howled for the Kindly Light.

And that was but one, and by no means one of he worst;
Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;
And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquility.

We move now to outside a German wood.
Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down
And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.
A Luger settled back deeply in its glove.
He was ordered to change places with the Jews.

Much casual death had drained away their souls.
The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.
When only the head was exposed the order came
To dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
The Luger hovered lightly in its glove.
He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Paradise Lost Book 5: An Epitome

Higgledy piggeldy
Archangel Rafael,
Speaking of Satan's re-
Bellion from God:

"Chap was decidedly
Turgiversational,
Given to lewdness and
Rodomontade."

Anthony Evan Hecht

Peekaboo: Three Songs For The Nursery

The longer thou livest, the more fool thou.

I

Go hide! Go hide! But through the latticework
Of my upraised bone hands
I see athlete and statesman, priest and clerk
Step forth as deodands.

Risking more than they know of life and limb
In playing Peekaboo—
Whose happiest chances couldn't be called "slim"—
I've tagged each: ICU

II

Cry; baby, cry!
You've got two reasons why.
The first is being born at all:
The second, my peremptory call.
Cry; baby, cry!

Weep, baby, weep!
No solaces in sleep.
Nightmare will ruin your repose
And daylight resurrect your woes.
Weep, baby, weep!

III

Bah, bah, black sheep, you supply the needs
Plaguing mourners: stylish widows' weeds.
Haute couture for all the fashion shows.
Black is the color of my true love's clothes.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Peripeteia

Of course, the familiar rustling of programs,
My hair mussed from behind by a grand gesture
Of mink. A little craning about to see
If anyone I know is in the audience,
And, as the house fills up,
A mild relief that no one there knows me.
A certain amount of getting up and down
From my aisle seat to let the others in.
Then my eyes wander briefly over the cast,
Management, stand-ins, make-up men, designers,
Perfume and liquor ads, and rise prayerlike
To the false heaven of rosetted lights,
The stucco lyres and emblems of high art
That promise, with crude Broadway honesty,
Something less than perfection:
Two bulbs are missing and Apollo's bored.

And then the cool, drawn-out anticipation,
Not of the play itself, but the false dusk
And equally false night when the houselights
Obey some planetary rheostat
And bring a stillness on. It is that stillness
I wait for.
Before it comes,
Whether we like it or not, we are a crowd,
Foul-breathed, gum-chewing, fat with arrogance,
Passion, opinion, and appetite for blood.
But in that instant, which the mind protracts,
From dim to dark before the curtain rises,
Each of us is miraculously alone
In calm, invulnerable isolation,
Neither a neighbor nor a fellow but,
As at the beginning and end, a single soul,
With all the sweet and sour of loneliness.
I, as a connoisseur of loneliness,
Savor it richly, and set it down
In an endless umber landscape, a stubble field
Under a lilac, electric, storm-flushed sky,
Where, in companionship with worthless stones,
Mica-flecked, or at best some rusty quartz,
I stood in childhood, waiting for things to mend.
A useful discipline, perhaps. One that might lead
To solitary, self-denying work
That issues in something harmless, like a poem,
Governed by laws that stand for other laws,
Both of which aim, through kindred disciplines,
At the soul's knowledge and habiliment.
In any case, in a self-granted freedom,
The mind, lone regent of itself, prolongs
The dark and silence; mirrors itself, delights
In consciousness of consciousness, alone,

Sufficient, nimble, touched with a small grace.

Then, as it must at last, the curtain rises,
The play begins. Something by Shakespeare.
Framed in the arched proscenium, it seems
A dream, neither better nor worse
Than whatever I shall dream after I rise
With hat and coat, go home to bed, and dream.
If anything, more limited, more strict—
No one will fly or turn into a moose.
But acceptable, like a dream, because remote,
And there is, after all, a pretty girl.
Perhaps tonight she'll figure in the cast
I summon to my slumber and control
In vast arenas, limitless space, and time
That yield and sway in soft Einsteinian tides.
Who is she? Sylvia? Amelia Earhart?
Some creature that appears and disappears
From life, from reverie, a fugitive of dreams?
There on the stage, with awkward grace, the actors,
Beautifully costumed in Renaissance brocade,
Perform their duties, even as I must mine,
Though not, as I am, always free to smile.

Something is happening. Some consternation.
Are the knives out? Is someone's life in danger?
And can the magic cloak and book protect?
One has, of course, real confidence in Shakespeare.
And I relax in my plush seat, convinced
That prompt as dawn and genuine as a toothache
The dream will be accomplished, provisionally true
As anything else one cares to think about.
The players are aghast. Can it be the villain,
The outrageous drunks, plotting the coup d'état,
Are slyer than we thought? Or we more innocent?
Can it be that poems lie? As in a dream,
Leaving a stunned and gap-mouthed Ferdinand,
Father and faery pageant, she, even she,
Miraculous Miranda, steps from the stage,
Moves up the aisle to my seat, where she stops,
Smiles gently, seriously, and takes my hand
And leads me out of the theatre, into a night
As luminous as noon, more deeply real,
Simply because of her hand, than any dream
Shakespeare or I or anyone ever dreamed.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Prospects

We have set out from here for the sublime
Pastures of summer shade and mountain stream;
I have no doubt we shall arrive on time.

Is all the green of that enameled prime
A snapshot recollection or a dream?
We have set out from here for the sublime

Without provisions, without one thin dime,
And yet, for all our clumsiness, I deem
It certain that we shall arrive on time.

No guidebook tells you if you'll have to climb
Or swim. However foolish we may seem,
We have set out from here for the sublime

And must get past the scene of an old crime
Before we falter and run out of steam,
Riddled by doubt that we'll arrive on time.

Yet even in winter a pale paradigm
Of birdsong utters its obsessive theme.
We have set out from here for the sublime;
I have no doubt we shall arrive on time.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Samuel Sewall

Samuel Sewall, in a world of wigs,
Flouted 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,
Her gracious ways and delicate white ears,
And held the course of nature abolute.

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

"Madam," he answered her, "I have a Friend
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,
And closed, imploring that she be not cruel,
"Your favorable answer will oblige,
Madam, your humble servant, Samuel Sewall."

Anthony Evan Hecht

Sarabande On Attaining The Age Of Seventy-Seven

The harbingers are come. See, see their mark;
White is their colour; and behold my head.
-- George Herbert

Long gone the smoke-and-pepper childhood smell
Of the smoldering immolation of the year,
Leaf-strewn in scattered grandeur where it fell,
Golden and poxed with frost, tarnished and sere.

And I myself have whitened in the weathers
Of heaped-up Januaries as they bequeath
The annual rings and wrongs that wring my withers,
Sober my thoughts, and undermine my teeth.

The dramatis personae of our lives
Dwindle and wizen; familiar boyhood shames,
The tribulations one somehow survives,
Rise smokily from propitiatory flames

Of our forgetfulness until we find
It becomes strangely easy to forgive
Even ourselves with this clouding of the mind,
This cinerous blur and smudge in which we live.

A turn, a glide, a quarter turn and bow,
The stately dance advances; these are airs
Bone-deep and numbing as I should know by now,
Diminishing the cast, like musical chairs.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Saul And David

It was a villainous spirit, snub-nosed, foul
Of breath, thick-taloned and malevolent,
That squatted within him wheresoever he went
.....And possessed the soul of Saul.

There was no peace on pillow or on throne.
In dreams the toothless, dwarfed, and squinny-eyed
Started a joyful rumor that he had died
.....Unfriended and alone.

The doctors were confounded. In his distress, he
Put aside arrogant ways and condescended
To seek among the flocks where they were tended
.....By the youngest son of Jesse,

A shepherd boy, but goodly to look upon,
Unnoticed but God-favored, sturdy of limb
As Michelangelo later imagined him,
.....Comely even in his frown.

Shall a mere shepherd provide the cure of kings?
Heaven itself delights in ironies such
As this, in which a boy's fingers would touch
.....Pythagorean strings

And by a modal artistry assemble
The very Sons of Morning, the ranked and choired
Heavens in sweet laudation of the Lord,
.....And make Saul cease to tremble.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Tarantula, Or The Dance Of Death

During the plague I came into my own.
It was a time of smoke-pots in the house
Against infection. The blind head of bone
Grinned its abuse

Like a good democrat at everyone.
Runes were recited daily, charms were applied.
That was the time I came into my own.
Half Europe died.

The symptoms are a fever and dark spots
First on the hands, then on the face and neck,
But even before the body, the mind rots.
You can be sick

Only a day with it before you’re dead.
But the most curious part of it is the dance.
The victim goes, in short, out of his head.
A sort of trance

Glazes the eyes, and then the muscles take
His will away from him, the legs begin
Their funeral jig, the arms and belly shake
Like souls in sin.

Some, caught in these convulsions, have been known
To fall from windows, fracturing the spine.
Others have drowned in streams. The smooth head-stone,
The box of pine,

Are not for the likes of these. Moreover, flame
Is powerless against contagion.
That was the black winter when I came
Into my own.

Anthony Evan Hecht

The Deodand

What are these women up to? They've gone and strung
Drapes over the windows, cutting out light
And the slightest hope of a breeze here in mid-August.
Can this be simply to avoid being seen
By some prying femme-de-chambre across the boulevard
Who has stepped out on a balcony to disburse
Her dustmop gleanings on the summer air?
And what of these rugs and pillows, all haphazard,
Here in what might be someone's living room
In the swank, high-toned sixteenth arrondissement?
What would their fathers, husbands, fiancés,
Those pillars of the old haute-bourgeoisie,
Think of the strange charade now in the making?
Swathed in exotic finery, in loose silks,
Gauzy organzas with metallic threads,
Intricate Arab vests, brass ornaments
At wrist and ankle, those small sexual fetters,
Tight little silver chains, and bangled gold
Suspended like a coarse barbarian treasure
From soft earlobes pierced through symbolically,
They are preparing some tableau vivant.
One girl, consulting the authority
Of a painting, perhaps by Ingres or Delacroix,
Is reporting over her shoulder on the use
Of kohl to lend its dark, savage allurements.
Another, playing the slave-artisan's role,
Almost completely naked, brush in hand,
Attends to these instructions as she prepares
To complete the seductive shadowing of the eyes
Of the blonde girl who appears the harem favorite,
And who is now admiring these effects
In a mirror held by a fourth, a well-clad servant.
The scene simmers with Paris and women in heat,
Darkened and airless, perhaps with a faint hum
Of trapped flies, and a strong odor of musk.
For whom do they play at this hot indolence
And languorous vassalage? They are alone
With fantasies of jasmine and brass lamps,
Melons and dates and bowls of rose-water,
A courtyard fountain's firework blaze of prisms,
Its basin sown with stars and poissons d'or,
And a rude stable smell of animal strength,
Of leather thongs, hinting of violations,
Swooning lubricities and lassitudes.
What is all this but crude imperial pride,
Feminized, scented and attenuated,
The exploitation of the primitive,
Homages of romantic self-deception,
Mimes of submission glamorized as lust?
Have they no intimation, no recall
Of the once queen who liked to play at milkmaid,
And the fierce butcher-reckoning that followed

Her innocent, unthinking masquerade?
Those who will not be taught by history
Have as their curse the office to repeat it,
And for this little spiritual debauch
(Reported here with warm, exacting care
By Pierre Renoir in 1872—
Apparently unnoticed by the girls,
An invisible voyeur, like you and me)
Exactions shall be made, an expiation,
A forfeiture. Though it take ninety years,
All the retributive iron of Racine
Shall answer from the raging heat of the desert.

In the final months of the Algerian war
They captured a very young French Legionnaire.
They shaved his head, decked him in a blonde wig,
Carmined his lips grotesquely, fitted him out
With long, theatrical false eyelashes
And a bright, loose-fitting skirt of calico,
And cut off all the fingers of both hands.
He had to eat from a fork held by his captors.
Thus costumed, he was taken from town to town,
Encampment to encampment, on a leash,
And forced to beg for his food with a special verse
Sung to a popular show tune of those days:
"Donnez moi à manger de vos mains
Car c'est pour vous que je fais ma petite danse;
Car je suis Madeleine, la putain,
Et je m'en vais le lendemain matin,
Car je suis La Belle France."

Anthony Evan Hecht

The Dover Bitch: A Criticism Of Life

So there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl
With the cliffs of England crumbling away behind them,
And he said to her, 'Try to be true to me,
And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
All over, etc., etc.'
Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read
Sophocles in a fairly good translation
And caught that bitter allusion to the sea,
But all the time he was talking she had in mind
the notion of what his whiskers would feel like
On the back of her neck. She told me later on
That after a while she got to looking out
At the lights across the channel, and really felt sad,
Thinking of all the wine and enormous beds
And blandishments in French and the perfumes.
And then she got really angry. To have been brought
All the way down from London, and then be addressed
As sort of a mournful cosmic last resort
Is really tough on a girl, and she was pretty.
Anyway, she watched him pace the room
and finger his watch-chain and seem to sweat a bit,
And then she said one or two unprintable things.
But you mustn't judge her by that. What I mean to say is,
She's really all right. I still see her once in a while
And she always treats me right. We have a drink
And I give her a good time, and perhaps it's a year
Before I see her again, but there she is,
Running to fat, but dependable as they come,
And sometimes I bring her a bottle of Nuit d'Amour.

[Note: See Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach']

Anthony Evan Hecht

The End Of The Weekend

A dying firelight slides along the quirt
Of the cast iron cowboy where he leans
Against my father's books. The lariat
Whirls into darkness. My girl in skin tight jeans
Fingers a page of Captain Marriat
Inviting insolent shadows to her shirt.

We rise together to the second floor.
Outside, across the lake, an endless wind
Whips against the headstones of the dead and wails
In the trees for all who have and have not sinned.
She rubs against me and I feel her nails.
Although we are alone, I lock the door.

The eventual shapes of all our formless prayers:
This dark, this cabin of loose imaginings,
Wind, lip, lake, everything awaits
The slow unloosening of her underthings
And then the noise. Something is dropped. It grates
against the attic beams. I climb the stairs
Armed with a belt.

A long magnesium shaft
Of moonlight from the dormer cuts a path
Among the shattered skeletons of mice.
A great black presence beats its wings in wrath.
Above the boneyard burn its golden eyes.
Some small grey fur is pulsing in its grip.

Anthony Evan Hecht

The Feast Of Stephen

I

The coltish horseplay of the locker room,
Moist with the steam of the tiled shower stalls,
With shameless blends of civet, musk and sweat,
Loud with the cap-gun snapping of wet towels
Under the steel-ribbed cages of bare bulbs,
In some such setting of thick basement pipes
And janitorial realities
Boys for the first time frankly eye each other,
Inspect each others' bodies at close range,
And what they see is not so much another
As a strange, possible version of themselves,
And all the sparring dance, adrenal life,
Tense, jubilant nimbleness, is but a vague,
Busy, unfocused ballet of self-love.

II

If the heart has its reasons, perhaps the body
Has its own lumbering sort of carnal spirit,
Felt in the tingling bruises of collision,
And known to captains as esprit de corps.
What is this brisk fraternity of timing,
Pivot and lobbing arc, or indirection,
Mens sana in men's sauna, in the flush
Of health and toilets, private and corporal glee,
These fleet caroms, plies and genuflections
Before the salmon-leap, the leaping fountain
All sheathed in glistening light, flexed and alert?
From the vast echo-chamber of the gym,
Among the stumbled shouts and shrill of whistles,
The bounced basketball sound of a leather whip.

III

Think of those barren places where men gather
To act in the terrible name of rectitude,
Of acned shame, punk's pride, muscle or turf,
The bully's thin superiority.
Think of the Sturm-Abteilungs Kommandant
Who loves Beethoven and collects Degas,
Or the blond boys in jeans whose narrowed eyes
Are focussed by some hard and smothered lust,
Who lounge in a studied mimicry of ease,
Flick their live butts into the standing weeds,
And comb their hair in the mirror of cracked windows
Of an abandoned warehouse where they keep
In darkened readiness for their occasion

The rope, the chains, handcuffs and gasoline.

IV

Out in the rippled heat of a neighbor’s field,
In the kilowatts of noon, they’ve got one cornered.
The bugs are jumping, and the burly youths
Strip to the waist for the hot work ahead.
They go to arm themselves at the dry-stone wall,
Having flung down their wet and salty garments
At the feet of a young man whose name is Saul.
He watches sharply these superbly tanned
Figures with a swimmer’s chest and shoulders,
A miler’s thighs, with their self-conscious grace,
And in between their sleek, converging bodies,
Brilliantly oiled and burnished by the sun,
He catches a brief glimpse of bloodied hair
And hears an unintelligible prayer.

Anthony Evan Hecht

The Ghost In The Martini

Over the rim of the glass
Containing a good martini with a twist
I eye her bosom and consider a pass,
Certain we'd not be missed

In the general hubbub.
Her lips, which I forgot to say, are superb,
Never stop babbling once (Aye, there's the ru
But who would want to curb

Such delicious, artful flattery?
It seems she adores my work, the distinguished grey
Of my hair. I muse on the salt and battery
Of the sexual clinch, and say

Something terse and gruff
About the marked disparity in our ages.
She looks like twenty-three, though eager enough.
As for the famous wages

Of sin, she can't have attained
Even to union scale, though you never can tell.
Her waist is slender and suggestively chained,
And things are going well.

The martini does its job,
God bless it, seeping down to the dark old id.
("Is there no cradle, Sir, you would not rob?"
Says ego, but the lid

Is off. The word is Strike
While the iron's hot.) And now, ingenuous and gay,
She is asking me about what I was like
At twenty. (Twenty, eh?)

You wouldn't have liked me then,
I answer, looking carefully into her eyes.
I was shy, withdrawn, awkward, one of those men
That girls seemed to despise,

Moody and self-obsessed,
Unhappy, defiant, with guilty dreams galore,
Full of ill-natured pride, an unconfessed
Snob and a thorough bore.

Her smile is meant to convey
How changed or modest I am, I can't tell which,
When I suddenly hear someone close to me say,
"You lousy son-of-a-bitch!"

A young man's voice, by the sound,
Coming, it seems, from the twist in the martini.

“You arrogant, elderly letch, you broken-down
Brother of Apeneck Sweeney!

Thought I was buried for good
Under six thick feet of mindless self-regard?
Dance on my grave, would you, you galliard stud,
Silenus in leotard?

Well, summon me you did,
And I come unwillingly, like Samuel’s ghost.
‘All things shall be revealed that have been hid.’
There’s something for you to toast!

You only got where you are
By standing upon my ectoplasmic shoulders,
And wherever that is may not be so high or far
In the eyes of some beholders.

Take, for example, me.
I have sat alone in the dark, accomplishing little,
And worth no more to myself, in pride and fee,
Than a cup of luke-warm spittle.

But honest about it, withal . . .”
(“Withal,” forsooth!) “Please not to interrupt.
And the lovelies went by, ‘the long and the short and the tall,’
Hankered for, but untupped.

Bloody monastic it was.
A neurotic mixture of self-denial and fear;
The verse halting, the cataleptic pause,
No sensible pain, no tear,

But an interior drip
As from an ulcer, where, in the humid deep
Center of myself, I would scratch and grip
The wet walls of the keep,

Or lie on my back and smell
From the corners the sharp, ammoniac, urine stink.
‘No light, but rather darkness visible.’
And plenty of time to think.

In that thick, fetid air
I talked to myself in giddy recitative:
‘I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live

Unto the world . . .’ I learned
Little, and was awarded no degrees.
Yet all that sunken hideousness earned
Your negligence and ease.

Nor was it wholly sick,
Having procured you a certain modest fame;
A devotion, rather, a grim device to stick
To something I could not name.”

Meanwhile, she babbles on
About men, or whatever, and the juniper juice
Shuts up at last, having sung, I trust, like a swan.
Still given to self-abuse!

Better get out of here;
If he opens his trap again it could get much worse.
I touch her elbow, and, leaning toward her ear,
Tell her to find her purse.

Anthony Evan Hecht

The Transparent Man

I'm mighty glad to see you, Mrs. Curtis,
And thank you very kindly for this visit--
Especially now when all the others here
Are having holiday visitors, and I feel
A little conspicuous and in the way.
It's mainly because of Thanksgiving. All these mothers
And wives and husbands gaze at me soulfully
And feel they should break up their box of chocolates
For a donation, or hand me a chunk of fruitcake.
What they don't understand and never guess
Is that it's better for me without a family;
It's a great blessing. Though I mean no harm.
And as for visitors, why, I have you,
All cheerful, brisk and punctual every Sunday,
Like church, even if the aisles smell of phenol.
And you always bring even better gifts than any
On your book-trolley. Though they mean only good,
Families can become a sort of burden.
I've only got my father, and he won't come,
Poor man, because it would be too much for him.
And for me, too, so it's best the way it is.
He knows, you see, that I will predecease him,
Which is hard enough. It would take a callous man
To come and stand around and watch me failing.
(Now don't you fuss; we both know the plain facts.)
But for him it's even harder. He loved my mother.
They say she looked like me; I suppose she may have.
Or rather, as I grew older I came to look
More and more like she must one time have looked,
And so the prospect for my father now
Of losing me is like having to lose her twice.
I know he frets about me. Dr. Frazer
Tells me he phones in every single day,
Hoping that things will take a turn for the better.
But with leukemia things don't improve.
It's like a sort of blizzard in the bloodstream,
A deep, severe, unseasonable winter,
Burying everything. The white blood cells
Multiply crazily and storm around,
Out of control. The chemotherapy
Hasn't helped much, and it makes my hair fall out.
I know I look a sight, but I don't care.
I care about fewer things; I'm more selective.
It's got so I can't even bring myself
To read through any of your books these days.
It's partly weariness, and partly the fact
That I seem not to care much about the endings,
How things work out, or whether they even do.
What I do instead is sit here by this window
And look out at the trees across the way.
You wouldn't think that was much, but let me tell you,
It keeps me quite intent and occupied.

Now all the leaves are down, you can see the spare,
Delicate structures of the sycamores,
The fine articulation of the beeches.
I have sat here for days studying them,
And I have only just begun to see
What it is that they resemble. One by one,
They stand there like magnificent enlargements
Of the vascular system of the human brain.
I see them there like huge discarnate minds,
Lost in their meditative silences.
The trunks, branches and twigs compose the vessels
That feed and nourish vast immortal thoughts.
So I've assigned them names. There, near the path,
Is the great brain of Beethoven, and Kepler
Haunts the wide spaces of that mountain ash.
This view, you see, has become my Hall of Fame,
It came to me one day when I remembered
Mary Beth Finley who used to play with me
When we were girls. One year her parents gave her
A birthday toy called "The Transparent Man."
It was made of plastic, with different colored organs,
And the circulatory system all mapped out
In rivers of red and blue. She'd ask me over
And the two of us would sit and study him
Together, and do a powerful lot of giggling.
I figure he's most likely the only man
Either of us would ever get to know
Intimately, because Mary Beth became
A Sister of Mercy when she was old enough.
She must be thirty-one; she was a year
Older than I, and about four inches taller.
I used to envy both those advantages
Back in those days. Anyway, I was struck
Right from the start by the sea-weed intricacy,
The fine-haired, silken-threaded filiations
That wove, like Belgian lace, throughout the head.
But this last week it seems I have found myself
Looking beyond, or through, individual trees
At the dense, clustered woodland just behind them,
Where those great, nameless crowds patiently stand.
It's become a sort of complex, ultimate puzzle
And keeps me fascinated. My eyes are twenty-twenty,
Or used to be, but of course I can't unravel
The tousled snarl of intersecting limbs,
That mackled, cinder grayness. It's a riddle
Beyond the eye's solution. Impenetrable.
If there is order in all that anarchy
Of granite mezzotint, that wilderness,
It takes a better eye than mine to see it.
It set me on to wondering how to deal
With such a thickness of particulars,
Deal with it faithfully, you understand,

Without blurring the issue. Of course I know
That within a month the sleeving snows will come
With cold, selective emphases, with massings
And arbitrary contrasts, rendering things
Deceptively simple, thickening the twigs
To frosty veins, bestowing epaulets
And decorations on every birch and aspen.
And the eye, self-satisfied, will be misled,
Thinking the puzzle solved, supposing at last
It can look forth and comprehend the world.
That's when you have to really watch yourself.
So I hope that you won't think me plain ungrateful
For not selecting one of your fine books,
And I take it very kindly that you came
And sat here and let me rattle on this way.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Third Avenue In Sunlight

Third Avenue in sunlight. Nature's error.
Already the bars are filled and John is there.
Beneath a plentiful lady over the mirror
He tilts his glass in the mild mahogany air.
I think of him when he first got out of college,
Serious, thin, unlikely to succeed;
For several months he hung around the Village,
Boldly T-shirtet, unfettered but unfreed.

Now he confides to a stranger, "I was first scout,
And kept my glimmers peeled till after dark.
Our outfit had as its sign a bloody knout,
We met behind the museum in Central Park.

Of course, we were kids." But still those savages,
War-painted, a flap of leather at the loins,
File silently against him. Hostages
Are never taken. One summer, in Des Moines,

They entered his hotel room, tomahawks
Flashing like barracuda. He tried to pray.
Three years of treatment. Occasionally he talks
About how he almost didn't get away.

Daily the prowling sunlight whets its knife
Along the sidewalk. We almost never meet.
In the Rembrandt dark he lifts his amber life.
My bar is somewhat further down the street.

Anthony Evan Hecht

Witness

Against the enormous rocks of a rough coast
The ocean rams itself in pitched assault
And spastic rage to which there is no halt;
Foam-white brigades collapse; but the huge host

Has infinite reserves; at each attack
The impassive cliffs look down in gray disdain
At scenes of sacrifice, unrelieved pain,
Figured in froth, aquamarine and black.

Something in the blood-chemistry of life,
Unspeakable, impressive, undeterred,
Expresses itself without needing a word
In this sea-crazed Empedoclean Strife.

It is a scene of unmatched melancholy,
Weather of misery, cloud cover of distress,
To which there are not witnesses, unless
One counts the briny, tough and thorned sea holly.

Anthony Evan Hecht