

THE ROAD NOT FINISHED
(An Evening's Chance Encounter)

New in town? I'm Hart Crane. Haven't seen you
at any of Sam's soirees before. He mentioned
you write poetry too. Are you blessed or cursed?
Is booze a boon or bondage? Is sex driving,
draining or definitive? Do you wish I'd shut up
and go annoy someone else? Why, thank you. Glad
you liked "White Buildings." No, I've never been
to Africa but I don't shy away from images
of other cultures-- twisted horizons, a carcass
quick with flies, another man's stinking shoes.
Poetry transports you anywhere, anywhen, anywhy.

At present, I owe my best work and my life to Sam.
Priceless Samuel Loveman, New York bookstore owner
who reads his wares and understands what he hawks.
One Manhattan night like this-- good company,
wine, music, laughter-- I suddenly deflated
like a punctured tire, wobbled to the edge
of the roof garden-- intending to jump.
And there was Sam-- a fast firm grip on my arm
from behind. Relentlessly, silently pulling me
back. And I hated him for it. The next day
I couldn't thank him enough for saving me.
It was an epiphany. And my stanzas, my verses
transcended mere rhetoric.

Oh, the reprieve won't last forever.
And I'll never be the mythos master I want to be.
But for now my words are alive again--
singing, pulsating with illumination
of all the colors in white.
Words are all I've got-- the same weary words
everyone has, but I strip off their linty clothes,
pry up layers of plating, pierce the rusty armor,
expose their nakedness shot with pumping veins
or sometimes the multiple faces
of flashing amethyst-- like a just-split geode
I'm the first human to see.

You say you know what it's like to hit bottom?
Most poets do. Seems to be part of the package.
Don't blame your parents. Mine couldn't bear
each other beyond eye-blink attraction
and the first belch of fact. Caramel-coated cur are
for a mother, hide-bound ledger book for a father.
They can't help who they are.
You can't help who you are, poet.

Remember, words are your life boats,
your conveyances. Kindling words,
load-bearing words. Chameleon, ambisexual words.
Build your bridges across the voids with words.
Maintain them with words. Be ready to fight
anything coming between you
and what you're building.

Each word has a root, a stem to lift it, a calyx
of connotation holding petals posing as truth.
And some are the real thing. Words sail every sea,
stream and sewer. Words walk the city
after midnight, hustle through Harlem, swagger
or stumble or hobble down Wall Street.
I thread Brooklyn Bridge cables with them, strung
with shreds of starlight, riverlight, peoplelight.
Words merge with rain and wind
and pluck the superstructure's harp.
Words orbit earth, gather inventive cosmic dust,
settle in cellars, sift into a lost cat's fur
and wait. Words are all a poet can own, but first
they have to be rescued, warmed, persuaded
to be heard, forget the damage done to them.

Does that excite you? Good, but beware
unreined exhuberance. It teeters high
on a narrow rail above emptiness
unable to break your fall.