

David Wojahn

For the Centenary of Hart Crane

i.

Grace Hart Crane Calls Up the Shades: A Seance, 1935

"Mother, you would be surprised to know that here
we voyage nowhere & our words are dross.

Sometimes of course we speak to one another
but in a kind of stage whisper as we float

back & forth, balloons atop a swimming pool.
(My metaphors have gotten . . . buoyant.)

So your request

for my 'unwritten poems' leaves me a little
cold, if you'll pardon the pun. Perhaps it's best

they remain unrecorded, although I know
their publication

might bring you in some needed cash.

My Cortez epic would have been a wreck. My odes
to pricks of cabin boys would make you flinch,

poison to **Criterion** & **Dial**. All your delicate
jaws would drop!

But here's one, Mother. It goes like this:"

ii.

Crane Writing Ad Copy: Manhattan, 1923

His ode to the Pittsburgh Water Heater praises
 "dependability & long life."

Over

& over he's labored a sentence, a katabasis
 of bumpkin prose. Next month the **Orizaba**

sails for Havana, but today it's warranties
 anviled & alchemized to dulcet song.

A fifth of hidden Cutty in his desk will ease
 the boredom and the shakes,

while Henry Vaughn

gets paged for lunch, **White Devil** through the coffee break.
 His father's letter scalds his pocket —

"Harold, do you think I'm **made** of money?" Specs
 of the Heat-o-matic, drafts of his reply: "Never mock

my calling, father: **I am made of words.**" Punch-out:
 unsteady down the subway steps he floats.

iii.

Crane at Factoria del Cigaros: Havana, 1926

"When you call for the rollers of big see-gars in truth,
 the room's vast as a zeppelin hanger. Hot

as sizzling butter. They hunch in rows, their mouths
 stitched shut.

Only the ceiling fans' rat-tat-tat

& the voice of The Reader, seated on a kind of dais
 galumphing through an Edgar Rice Burroughs,

hand gestures galore: **Tarzan y el Pais
Perdido.**

Cantatas from their wrists, the stogies flow

year upon year, through every Tarzan, every Dumas:
word as betal nut, page as aromatic snorts

of nicotine. In time their hands themselves turn ash.
Ashes to ashes, prose to prose. The art

of poetry here breaks down. O tongueless bell, a-toll for no on
Basta! Basta

Forgive me the done, the left undone."

iv.

At the Blessing of Animals: Taxco, Xmas, 1932

The white cat can't abide her earrings nor
her blotchy slather of pink dye. Turkeys

peck their tinsel chainmail & the taxi burros
sport sombreros, bullwhipping tails at flies.

Craveted monkeys scold at green **pericos**
& Hart's lost Peggy in the sweat-drenched throng.

Mescal-addled, seeing double, he perches
on a wall to spy her,

like a figure on the railing

of a ghost ship, figurehead weathering some private tempest,
reefward spiralling. Mariachi blare,

the towerbells' spindrift oversong. As the blessed
exuent the ark,

he catches a glimpse of her.

The she's lost again to the braying tidal clamor
hissing out the church doors to the bestial square.

v.

A Grave in Garrettsville: 1989

Stone Age, Bronze Age, Age of Iron,
Age of Voyage, Age of Cable
arching rivers.

But Age of Silver thine. Age of Gold, which burns
of course, the tongue. Age of Night-Shake Terror.

Age of L. and I, who'd driven hours, arguing.
& Age of Stone **redux**, where **Lost At Sea**

was sudden rockdrilled granite, **HAROLD HART CRANE.**
& L. half-smashed,
with garlands, on one knee,

five years to live. No sexton to lead us. Compassless,
we'd staggered 'till your plot loomed up,

landlocked among oak, the drought-shriven grass.
Fabled shadow, the sea still keeps you. Drowned book,

the sod & sea & twilight keep a counsel of their own.
To salt we commended thee
& all night drove toward home.
