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“Lie #4: That Frances Osgood Slept with E.A. Poe” and “Lie #6: That Hart Crane Crawled in Bed between the Cowleys” (poems)

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LIE #4: THAT FRANCES OSGOOD SLEPT WITH E. A. POE

They say it isn’t sex that you remember.
I disagree. I think of Edgar’s frown
that night we lay in bed till after five
talking about the future as the ember
beneath the grate flickered, burning down
to nothing. I had never felt alive

like that, I thought—he so preoccupied,
imagine every variant of death
he could, and I determined to give birth
to one of our ideas before I died,
the “curse of poetry” our shibboleth.
But poetry does not disturb the earth:

I can’t agree with all that talk of spirit
he made. It’s opening my legs, I swear,
ever so slightly while he sucked my breast,
then took my thigh in his left hand to steer it
over his own, coming inside to bear
my hips on his hips, I remember best.

I wouldn’t scribble this, were not my eyes
so bleary from the pills and tea, like blood
flushed through a drain, my nurse pours down my throat.
She blinds my body so my soul might rise
invisibly, like smoke, above the flood
of longing that slaps against this burning boat,

but I am sinking faster than their hope.
I sense a swirling sea surround me. Hate
I couldn’t call it, but despair’s the thing
that slowly starts to tighten like a rope,
as fastened to the mainmast of my fate,
I feel its spar inside me still. And still I cling.

LIE #6: THAT HART CRANE CRAWLED IN BED BETWEEN THE COWLEYS

“Exhaustion has become its own reward,”
I said, plopping onto their sheets, as gray
as grebes too filled with ennui to attack.
My life a lark compared to theirs, yet bored
from cruising sailors who drooled like dogs to play
at paradise, I flung across her back

one outstretched arm, then cupped her breast, then drew
the fingers of my right hand down his spine,
who turned to face me, angry though not vexed,
asking, “Now what are we supposed to do?”
“You can’t take her alone, I’ve come for mine;”
I answered, then spread out, not oversexed,

as she claimed later, but in love with them
both. Coupled with responsibilities
to nest all longing in a solo voice,
still, aching that un homme might be une femme,
I thought of nothing but my urge to please:
Things weren’t the way I’d hoped. I had no choice

but to forage the private dreams of friends
for my dreams. Like a mockingbird stealing
the songs it loves, I faked theirs as my own.
Yet theirs could never justify my ends
until, defeated by a lack of feeling,
scrubbing their bone with skin, their skin with bone,

I wore down what they were with what I seemed,
flitting behind my poetry and thin,
belabored schemes. By dropping wings out there
in West Connecticut, as Malcolm squirmed,