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"Concerning Alice, Wife of a Junior Executive Assigned in Tangier"

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Concerning Alice, 
Wife of a Junior Executive 
Assigned in Tangier

OLIVER RICE

She lies alert in the night 
thinking of ambiguity, 
of Marc Chagall and Virginia Woolf 
reaching just to the verge of comprehension,

who has had courses on almost everything 
in Chapel Hill and New Orleans 
but does not know what to make of herself.

Believes she hears the drums. 
They did not wake him, said Paul Bowles, 
because he took them into his dreams.

* 

They seem to observe her in the market. 
But perhaps not,

veiled, turbaned, robed, 
squatting in the dust beside their heaps of wares, 
leading their donkeys through the alleys,

their faces remote and shrewd in the Grand Socco 
where she takes her tea, 
thinking of the bizarre, 
of Alberto Giacometti and Charles Baudelaire 
miming the guiles of reality,

where Paul Bowles might have passed 
one April, one November, 
fastidious, astute, decadent.
They have lives there, mothers, daughters, behind the whitewashed flaking walls, have privacies there, husbands, wives, rules of the morning, the afternoon, the night, lore of the unaccountable past, of the desert, the sea, the mountains, of the streets that expatriated Paul Bowles, where she goes in her dubious person thinking of the grotesque, of Pablo Picasso and Edgar Allan Poe mocking the tenets of credibility, her faculties poised for the exotic, yearning for news from home.

* Takes the tour again, with a visiting company wife, a view of the bay, the villas in the hills, a turn through the Museum of Antiquities, the shops on the Boulevard Pasteur, passing the houses where Paul Bowles lived at various times with various people, thinking of derangement, of Joan Miro and Jean Cocteau perturbing the auras of meaning.

* She is not ready for children. No, she declares to the scent of hashish, the trance music of the black healers, the calligraphy,
the flies on the butcher’s mutton,
glimpses into the mosque,
into dismal illusory menacing Islam,

declares to the stories of Paul Bowles and Jane,
the cruelty, the futility, the despair,

thinking of disavowal,
of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg
pursuing rumors of the ecstatic, the psychedelic.

In the Petit Socco, she is told,
they practice any depravity.

What does she dare to know?
And how?

Who has found an Arab tutor,
but cannot become her friend.
Who has made couscous but did not get it right.