

Samah Rash  
The Clandestine City of Essaouira

We were on our way to Essaouira — a coastal town in North Africa where the population of humans is handsomely outnumbered by the population of seagulls. It is a town of coiling streets where one unassuming door could open into a palace, and the next, a house of a poor man. A quaint town surrounded by rust-covered, brass cannons — it was conquered by the Portuguese and used to be a maritime fortress. Now it is mostly occupied by the locals with the occasional European tourist who likes to sip cappuccinos, write poetry, and do whatever else European tourists like to do.

The waves heave themselves onto the towering stone walls and occasionally will hurl themselves a bit too high, resulting in an ocean water-covered passerby. The locals go swimming year-round even though it never gets warm in Essaouira. The wind is what keeps the the temperature from being mercurial; it's always racing through the busy streets, picking up speed as it bounces off of the narrow, sandy passageways, and slows as it hurries up the inclined alleyways again. The smell of Thuja wood, rose petals, slimy green olives, and pounded Argan seeds cling to the wind and catch a free ride wherever the breeze goes. The wind is alive in Essaouira. It tells stories — tourists simply never have the time to listen, but travelers do.

The cats in this city are grotesquely neglected —they wear many signs of oppression. They mostly dwell beneath the feet of customers at seaside café's and miniature seafood restaurants. They compete off of human's refused bits of fish bones and raw oysters and if they get lucky, a few remnant French fries if a bird has not snatched them first.

Alongside cats which seem to rule the city, are children. Screaming children, laughing children, smiling children, but mostly children whose hands look like those of a seventy-year-old man: cracked, callous, and bleeding from working too much — from working too hard. They follow you. Their eyes pierce through yours if you stare. You'll always want to stare back but it pains you to do so. It pains you so much. They call for you with their placid yet fierce voices. They tap you on the shoulder. They tug at your skirt. They trip over your feet. Human touch will never burn more than a tap from one of these children. They ask you for food. They ask you for money. It hurts to say no, so you never say no, but it hurts even when you put the last of your *Dirham* in their hands. It hurts when you thieve a piece of a baguette from the table and bury it beneath their shirts while their supervisor is not in sight. There is seemingly nothing to be done to feel less pain for them. Their dusty faces make it difficult to tell one child from the other, yet if you are able to look deep into their abysmal eyes, that is where their spirit resides — dormant yet able to be aroused within a moment. Their eyes are the only place where there is no dust. Their eyes glow a mesmerizing hue of fervency.