

Trinity Byerly

Being an Octopus

It stares at the young woman through the glass, its eyes black and non-moving. Its grape-purple, soft head is arched backwards, touching two of its back tentacles, which match the color of a ripe eggplant. The rest of its tentacles reach out as if to touch the woman, its off-white suction cups sticking to the glass, always wanting to break it to escape, but never being able to. The young woman, sixteen years of age, stares back at the octopus, her light blue eyes connected by an ephemeral appendage to the octopus's black ones. Her head tilts to the side, and her small hand comes up, as if on its own accord, to press upon the glass, tethering herself to the octopus stuck inside. She can feel its energy, and the octopus can feel hers. Who are you? She asks in her head. The octopus seems to ask the same thing. They hold each other's gazes for a beat more, and then everything turns a bright white.

The woman blinks, the brightness receding, and looks around, confused. She is no longer in the aquarium, her best friend no longer at her side, and everything is devoid of color. Every few seconds she sees something zoom by in the corner of her eye, but she doesn't comprehend what it is. She then notices that her body feels different, that it is less solid and rigid. She looks down and flinches at the sight of short tentacles floating around her body. They are an eggplant-purple, and on the underside of them are off-white suction cups. Another blob passes by in her line of sight, and this time she whirls around, her eyes trailing a clown fish. She finally looks around her and notices hundreds of other fish swimming in all directions. She's in the ocean. She struggles to breathe as this comes clear to her. I'm the octopus. She is only a few inches in length, her head the size of a thumb. How did this happen? What do I do? How do I get back?

Just then, all of the fish start swimming towards her swiftly, causing her to become disoriented. She can't see well, so she's wondering what they're all swimming away from. Then a large, black shape comes into view, and an instinctive fear settles over her. Her tentacles start to propel her away, following the bubble trails left by the other fish. Her delicate body carries her to a large, dark green, tree-shaped piece of coral, and she finds a small hole to fit her tiny body into. She waits, her gills moving in and out rapidly, for the shark to pass by. I've never felt a fear like this. She tries to calm herself down, but her breathing only gets quicker. She feels as if she's going to lose consciousness when the shark finally passes by an eternity of seconds later; it doesn't even pause at the coral. As her breathing slowly returns to normal, she notices that her body blends in with the coral, as if she has been growing with it since the beginning. She closes her eyes, believing this must be a dream, or that she's in one of those virtual realities the aquarium was advertising, but she doesn't remember her and her friend trying it out. She opens her eyes again, but she's no longer in the coral.

There's sand everywhere she looks, settling and then unsettling on the ocean floor, as unseen creatures move through it. What's happening now? She notices that her tentacles have gotten longer and that the purple has deepened so much that the color threatens to morph into black. She can feel that her head is larger too, bouncing up and down lightly as she propels herself along the ocean floor. She feels her heart beating, but then she realizes that she can feel the same pumping sensation in two other areas of her body. I have three hearts?! She comes back to herself when she notices her tentacles continuing to tentatively reach out, feeling for something on the cornmeal colored floor. What am I doing? Just then she spots a small pale-pink

shrimp, and an overwhelming hunger strikes her. Before she can comprehend what she's doing, she launches herself on the shrimp, her beak opening wide and clamping shut when the shrimp is safely inside. She chews it once then swallows. It is only after this that she regains focus, but one thought trumps all of the others: I'm still hungry. Food, food, food is on repeat in her mind, her body instinctively looking for more shrimp or little fish. She continues her prowl on the ocean floor, consuming every little ocean creature she comes across, but it's not many, and it's certainly not enough. The hunger is eating her instead of the other way around. How do you live like this? She asks the mind of the body she's occupying, but she never receives an answer. Her eyes shutter shut as she tries to breathe through the hunger pains.

She opens her eyes again, and this time she notices the sun peeking through the surface of the ocean. She blinks, trying to focus her vision, and she notices another octopus a few feet away. This one is yellow in color with sunburnt-mango spots; it looks like someone took a paintbrush and splattered sunburnt-mango paint haphazardly across its body. She was about to swim over to him to try to communicate, to ask him how she ended up stuck in this octopus's body, but as soon as her tentacles reached out towards him, his body was lifted out of the water by a pair of human hands. She instinctively swims lower so the hands can't reach her, and the fear she felt when she saw the shark dives back into her. Her panic causes her to freeze in place, her tentacles suspended in the cool current, bobbing up and down slightly. The only thing she can move is her eyes, which she keeps on the rippled yellow octopus above. She watches in horrible amazement as the man lifts the octopus by its tentacles above its head and smashes it onto a rock that peeks out of the surface of the water. This brings her out of her frozen state, but only enough for her to recoil a few feet lower, two of her tentacles coming up to conceal her eyes. Her eyes seem to have a different agenda, however, because they peek through her tentacles and watch the man tenderize the octopus again and again against the rock, the yellow and sunburnt-mango freckled octopus moving less and less each time until finally he doesn't move at all. The man just walks away then with his dinner, the octopus limp in his hand, the tentacles cascading off his fingers. The grape-purple octopus is left alone, digesting what she just saw, her entire body trembling. Although she never knew the other octopus, it feels as if a family member had died right in front of her. She wants to cry for him and shout her grief through the entire ocean, but nothing comes. The words are trapped inside her head with no way of escaping through her beak. He just murdered him. He just murdered him as if he was nothing, unimportant. The last thought that goes through her mind as she closes her eyes in disgust is: Am I like him?

As she opens her eyes this time, she realizes that she's in a glass box, her fully grown body barely fitting in the space between the bottom of the box and the water that stops several inches from the top, causing her to keep her head low in order to breathe. Where am I now? She then feels a rumbling sensation beneath her, and it occurs to her that she's being transported somewhere. Please, please not to a restaurant. The car jerks to a stop, causing her face and tentacles to smush against the glass. A feeling of anxiety envelops her; she feels as if a blanket is wrapped around her gills, stopping the oxygen from reaching her. The back door of the car opens, and a pair of hands picks up her box, causing the yellow octopus to enter her mind. She's once again filled with terror, remembering those human hands crashing the octopus's body forcefully against the rocks. The image only dissolves when she realizes she's being carried inside a gigantic gray, concrete building. So not a restaurant. That's good. The terror loosens its rope around her neck and the hands continue to carry her down several halls, and she notices that glass tanks fill every space, thousands of fish and other aquatic animals filling them up. The

aquarium. Maybe my human body is still here. She is taken through a back door and dumped unceremoniously into her own tank, thankfully several times larger than the box she just came in. White-yellow sand covers several inches of the bottom of the tank, but it feels unnatural; it's too gritty, unlike the plush cornmeal sand that covers the bottom of the ocean floor. There are also fake plants scattered about, but they don't give her the security that the tree-shaped coral did when she was hiding from the shark. There is nowhere for her to hide here; there is no privacy. She moves her head, her tentacles swishing about her, looking for her human body, but all she sees are little kids holding hands with their mothers and fathers, gawking at each tank they pass. She slumps to the bottom of the tank in defeat, her eggplant-colored tentacles blending into the white-yellow of the sand.

She sits here for several days, occasionally being fed shrimp and little fish. She's not hungry anymore, but she'd rather be back in the ocean. At least I had freedom in the ocean. People come and go, looking for her camouflaged body in the sand. For the first few days, she looks at everyone who passes, hoping to see herself, but she soon quits that, not even bothering to look up from her spot at the bottom of the tank. One day two workers open the top of her tank and pull her out. The rope of fear tightens around her once again as she thinks, This is it. They're going to eat me. But they immediately stuff her inside a small glass box barely big enough for her, filled with water, and they slam a lid on top and put her back in the tank. She notices people are pushed up against the glass of her tank, watching her. Why did they put me in here?

Then she notices a small hole on the side of the small tank she's in. A video she saw a month ago of an octopus escaping a boat through a small hole flashes through her mind. At the time she thought it was so cool, but now it just feels humiliating. They put me in here just for show. She doesn't want to give them what they want, but she can't stand being trapped inside of the small box, her tentacles wrapped around her whole body. She eats her pride and begins to put one of her tentacles in the tiny hole, and she is surprised how easily it glides through. She repeats this process with her remaining tentacles, the fear-rope loosening a notch every time one makes it through. She ignores the people shouting and laughing from outside her tank. She doesn't want to watch the joy on their faces. Finally, all of her tentacles are through, splayed out like bike spokes in the water. I can do this. She puts her beak through first, takes a deep breath, and starts to push her head the rest of the way out. The whole time it feels like hands are pushing on both sides of her head, trying to squeeze her brains out. She closes her eyes and pushes the last bit of her head out, and she trembles in relief as she stretches out in the water. The workers come back to take the glass box out, and she drifts to the bottom, her eggplant coloring transforming into white-yellow.

Another day passes with more eyes staring at her briefly and children screaming down the halls, but then there is a shift. She always knows when someone is looking at her; she can feel it, but the feeling usually passes rather quickly. This time, however, the feeling stays with her, so she decides to look up. She freezes, seeing her own light-blue eyes reflected back towards her. I'm here. She blinks just to make sure, but she is still staring back at her human self. She slowly swims upward, one of her tentacles automatically reaching out towards the glass. She watches as her human body brings up her small hand, also stretching towards the glass. They connect through the tank, and a warm-cold sensation descends on her. She feels herself enter her real body, relief rushing through her blood, and she blinks, her human eyes focusing on the octopus's. I know you. It's time for you to go home.

Samah Rash

Looking for Essaouira

I

I was on my 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 cannons—it used to be a maritime fortress and was conquered by the Portuguese. 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 throw themselves against the towering stone walls. Occasionally, an especially tall wave will hurl itself a bit too high, resulting in an ocean-drenched passerby.

The locals go swimming year-round even though it never gets warm in Essaouira. The wind is what keeps the temperature from being mercurial; it's always racing through the busy streets, picking up speed as it bounces off 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 never have the time to listen, but travelers do.

The cats in this city are grotesquely neglected, wearing many signs of oppression. They mostly dwell beneath the feet of customers at seaside cafés and small seafood restaurants, competing for fish bones and discarded oysters. Occasionally, a few of the lucky ones are thrown a handful of French fries if a bird has not snatched them first.

Alongside the cats which seem to rule the city are the children. Screaming children, laughing children, smiling children, but mostly children whose hands look like those of a seventy-year-old man: cracked, calloused, and bleeding from working too much—from working too hard. The children follow you. Their eyes pierce through yours if you stare. You'll feel compelled to stare back, but it pains you to do so. It pains you so much. They call for you with their placid 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. They ask you for water. 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. Their dusty faces make it difficult to tell one child from the other, yet if you are able to look deep into the abyss of their 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 burn with a mesmerizing hue of fervency.

II

My forehead slammed against the inside of the car window as we hit an unfortunate pothole. The engine was violently rattling. In my state of sleepy stupor, I forgot for an instant where I was. All I knew was that the digital clock read 10:27 in flashing, neon green numbers.

The road we were on (or lack of, for that matter) was merely a stretch of sand-covered asphalt extending all the way from Marrakech to the coast. Our 1994 Peugeot was smothered in a thick coat of sand-dust. Surrounding the vehicle was a dizzying expanse of barren, white desert. Pounding our fists against the dashboard, we attempted to revive the moribund air conditioning

unit. The Peugeot was straining to cough out just a few breaths of cool air, but it could not compete with the beaming heat that was radiating through the thin metal roof. It was hard to keep my eyes open between the burning white sand and the ivory sky. I stared at the outline of the sun from behind the haze—it was suspended like a floating crystal ball.

After an hour or so, the car began to make some routinely eerie noises—we took that as a sign to give the fiery engine a break. Scanning the desert for any abnormalities, a few uneven bumps in the western horizon caught our attention. Taking the chance, we headed for the specks, hoping the engine would hold on for just a little longer.

“Jackpot!” Hamza exclaimed, as he giggled like a schoolboy while simultaneously impressing himself by his appropriate use of the word.

“Is it a city?” I asked.

“We’re almost 100 kilometers into the deser—”

“Foothills, maybe?” I interrupted.

“You’ll see,” said Hamza.

As the bubble of dust around us settled, I realized that we hadn’t found a city, nor had we bumped into foothills. Instead, we came across an almond tree grove. The ground sloped into a deep ravine. Moss glowed emerald green from the underside of the rocks, suggesting moisture, suggesting life. I could smell the earth, the raw, acidic, nutty aroma and the oddly comforting smell of mud. We made our way out of the car and wandered towards the grove. Using the sole of my shoe, I dusted the soil off one of the larger exposed tree roots. Sitting on the textured root, I looked up. Hundreds of light-green, oval fruits dangled from the branches like unripe apricots that have yet to see the sun. Reaching up, I clasped the fruit in the palm of my hand and pulled it until I could hear the thousands of microscopic tendons snap at once. Lifting it to my nose, I inhaled: a combination of woody, willow bark and bitter cyanide. I cracked the outer shell open with my front teeth and quickly spat out the excess fuzz. The seed slept, perfectly encased in the palest-green I had ever seen—pure, untouched, undamaged.

After about thirty minutes, we restarted the car. Each pore in my body widened from the excruciating heat. Sweat condensed in the palms of my hands, welled in the crevices of my collar bones, and dripped down my spine. As the sun reached her highest point, the fog quickly dissipated and the vista looked even more expansive. I felt as though my eyes could see for hundreds of kilometers. I couldn’t wait to see the coast. *Maybe if I try hard enough, I can see Essaouira from here.* During my staring game, I noticed an outline of some geometric sculptures in the distance.

“What’s that?” I asked Hamza, pointing my finger towards the strange figures. Hamza rolled his eyes.

“I’m not sure. Probably nothing. Probably just shapes from the heat. This is Sahara. Sometimes it get so hot you would not believe! 47 degrees! It get so hot, you can cook egg on ground. Straight out of chicken, crack, cook, eat. Good protein! Healthy! Make your hair grow long and pretty!” Hamza laughed hysterically.

We drove a few more kilometers in silence.

“Look, I promise it’s not from the heat. Can’t you see the shapes too?” I asked impatiently.

“You are feisty young woman, you know that? Too much sun get to your brain. Too much time spent in the America? Or maybe too much raw almond. *Ha ha!* You want to know what it is? It is called a *mirage*. ”

Whispering to myself, I cursed not only Hamza, but both his parents for bringing such a brazen person into this world.

“Look—I’m being serious. That’s not a mirage!” I said as I pointed my finger towards the north.

Hamza looked in the direction of my pointed finger and let out a small gasp. Rubbing his eyes as if to clear them, he squinted and furrowed his brows.

“Wait, I think you right.”

“I told you,” I mumbled just loud enough for him to hear. “Now can we please just make a quick stop?”

Hamza said something in Arabic to himself. Guttural noises filled the car.

Why does he always sound so angry when he talks? Is that just him or is it the dialect? The sounds were so familiar, yet so foreign to me. I used to know the language, but I was too young when I was relocated to remember it all. Still, I refused to believe that I’d forgotten. Instead, I told myself that I knew it—that it was simply dormant—that one day I’d understand the language again. Like a mantra, I’d often whisper to myself the words that I so sacredly memorized as a child: “*Mama*” [mom], “*Baba*” [dad], “*Kitab*” [book], “*Lmaa*” [water]…

With an unimpressed expression and one eyebrow raised, I looked over my shoulder, still waiting for Hamza’s answer.

“Sure,” he replied indignantly.

As we neared, we noticed that these structures were not simply heat-induced shapes, but houses, many of them, gathered in the middle of the desert. Mud houses, draped with hand-woven carpets stitched intricately with every color imaginable—a Bedouin village.

III

The Peugeot slowed as the engine came to a rattling stop. There were nine houses, and three of them were taller than they were wide. A vibrant curtain which hung from the taller structure (and doubled as its front door) was quickly whipped aside, and a boney, mud-crusted goat and six small children came rushing towards the car.

“Des bonbons! Des bonbons!” the children shrieked. Their arms reached out and their hands were cupped, waiting impatiently for some candy.

Still sitting inside the car, I quickly turned to Hamza. “Do you have anything? I only have chewing gum.”

“I look, you tell them wait,” Hamza replied, seemingly miffed by his new responsibility of digging through every pocket, pouch, and crevice for something sweet.

“Okay, but I don’t speak Ara—”

“So say it in French!” Hamza interrupted.

As I stepped out of the car, I was immediately bombarded by the friendly embrace of twelve thin, dusty arms. They hugged my waist so tightly that I couldn’t help but to cough out the last of my breath. They circled me, laughing and skipping, hovering around me like a balloon skirt.

“Attends, attends, attends,” I tried to calm their excited squeals, “Nous cherchons des bonbons.”

Hamza's bear-like hand extended through the passenger window; his arm-hair swayed in the desert wind and his fist overflowed with breath mints. "This will do." Hamza carelessly dropped the mints into my hands, nearly rolling up the car window on my fingers.

A faint call from the mud house caught our attention. Immediately, all the children began tugging on my clothes, pulling me in the direction of their home. As we approached the entrance, the sweet smell of mint leaves and rosewater met my nose. I looked back at the car and Hamza bitterly mouthed in my direction, "*A quick stop, a quick stop.*"

Tipping my head in the direction of the house, I signaled for Hamza to join us. A few growls and guttural noises later, he joined me at the entrance. Pulling aside the kaleidoscope curtain, a woman stood holding a tray of tea glasses. "*Asalaam aleikum,*" the woman said.

Her grin was so wide that I could see the spaces in her mouth where teeth once grew. She leaned over the tray and kissed both my cheeks. Gesturing for both Hamza and I to sit, we made our way to the common area. She placed the tea tray on the rough wool carpet. Each glass contained a sprig of mint. Red and gold, woven floor pillows lined the family room, and four sheepskin drums hung like full moons from the walls. The woman patted the top of my head with her leathery hands, then rushed to the kitchen to grab the tea kettle. Her animal-skin slippers sounded like tap shoes as she shuffled around her home. She poured the steaming water over the mint sprigs, and I watched as the leaves quickly wilted. The woman turned to Hamza and asked him a question in Arabic.

"She's wondering if you are a tourist here," Hamza said as he lifted the tea glass to his mouth and attempted to cover up the fact that he had just seared the tip of his tongue.

"Ah, no. Well, I do not live here. But I'm not a tourist, either," I replied.

Hamza translated my words into their dialect as I sat, blindly nodding my head in agreement. "She's wondering what you are doing here, then. Visiting family?" Hamza asked on behalf of the woman.

"No, no. Just traveling," I said. "I'm looking for something."

IV

High above, the clouds swirled themselves into a peachy-orange and baby-blue helix, while some white stratus clouds streaked the horizon. Distant olive trees freckled the once-barren horizon. A white and blue city peeked its head over the sand dunes.

"Is this it?" I asked Hamza.

"Yes, yes. Welcome to Essaouira," Hamza replied.

As we turned into the city gate, I caught sight of the glimmering waves through the holes in the massive fortress walls. Seagulls were perched on rooftops, clotheslines, and café awnings. Occasionally, they would dive into the ocean, spearing sardines with their dagger-like beaks. Hamza parked the car in front of a shadowed alleyway.

"I get your bag." Hamza said as he opened the trunk.

I reached into my wallet and handed Hamza 73 dirham.

"Your hotel is at the end of the alley, on left, okay?" Hamza asked.

I placed my hand on my heart and lowered my gaze to the dusty road. "Thank you for bringing me here," I replied.

"I hope you find what it is you look for." Hamza turned around and walked back to the car.

Before checking into my room, I asked permission to leave my belongings with the hotel clerk. Grabbing a thick shawl from my luggage, I wrapped it tightly around my head to preserve my skin from the numbing wind. Walking back down the alleyway, I passed by a dimly-lit store where the craftsmen were selling elephants and giraffes sculpted out of Thuja wood, and another store where they sold colorful, leather slippers. I kept walking.

I closed my eyes as I strolled—completely entranced—meditating on the sound of the city. I opened my eyes as I turned a corner, but before I could react, suddenly a small, brown-eyed girl collided into me—falling on the ground with a thud. Immediately I reached out to help her. Her arms were rough like coral. I kneeled on the ground in front of her.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Quickly I remembered the fact that she didn’t speak a word of English. I asked again: “Ça va?” I swept her thick, coffee-colored hair out of her face. The whites of her eyes glowed in the dusky light. Slowly, she reached for my hands, eyes still fixated on mine. “D’où venez-vous?” (Where are you from?) she asked, innocently and completely unfazed by her fall.

“Je ne sais pas. Je crois que je viens des Etats-unis,” (*I don’t know. I suppose, America*) I replied.

“Mais, ta peau est de la même couleur que la mienne,” (*But your skin is the same color as mine*) the young girl replied, as she looked down at my hands. “Vous êtes chez vous” (*You are home*).

Her words stuck to me like freshly-harvested honey. She slowly stood, still grasping my hand, still gazing into my eyes. We started walking. She pulled my arm, leading me down a labyrinth of streets. One by one she passed her friends, who giggled and shrieked as we hastened through the alleys, kicking up a cloud of sand-dust as we went. I lost my sense of direction, but something inside me didn’t mind. We passed beneath clotheslines and tripped over a family of stray cats until the narrow street opened up into the city square. I heard the familiar sound of roaring waves. The breeze grew stronger and the crashing grew louder. We stood atop the fortress, overlooking the dark waters. I could smell the burning of incense—of sandalwood—in the wind. It warmed my lungs. I looked down at the girl and her grasp only tightened. She shuffled closer and wrapped her arm around my thigh. Resting her head on my leg, she closed her eyes as I stared into the dark, rippled horizon; completely bewildered by how she might have just brought me back—brought me home.