El invierno de los jilgueros
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Young Brahim sketches the horizon from the port of Alhucemas off the north coast of Morocco, an island that he'll leave only briefly during the roughly two decades that we readers are privileged to accompany this beautifully unassuming son, brother, neighbor beginning in 1975, fifty years after the islands' establishment as a Spanish *plaza de soberanía*. Against that shaded canvas are the starker lines of the daily suffering and acts of compassion that mark key moments in Brahim's early life — the death of his seamstress mother, the return of his older brother, Musa, from *el desierto*, and his application to art school in Tetouan at Musa's encouragement.

In the sparse, exquisite prose that borders on poetry in this three-part novel, Mohamad El Morabet conveys the soul of this young man and the place he inhabits. Peppered throughout are references to musical selections and to the changing Mediterranean light, elements that communicate as clearly as the words on the page. Simple routines such as exchanging pleasantries about migratory birds with the local shopkeeper, or sitting in near silence with a bedridden neighbor, are distilled to their most moving essence, as are the daily missives he leaves for his older brother Musa once the latter loses his mental faculties and can no longer care for himself —

"El mar lo llevas dentro. Surca tus alas. El desierto está muy muy lejos. No hay de qué tener miedo."

"He apagado la radio. A ver cuántas flexiones y abdominales consigues hacer hoy."

"Las mejores alas son las que no se ven. Tienes magdalenas para desayunar."

What we don't observe directly about teenage Brahim's brief séjour in Tetouan, we witness indirectly through the journal entries of his teacher, thirty-year-old Olga, who has just arrived to Morocco wide-eyed from Madrid to teach at the local fine arts school. She's come in search of some practical application of her vocation, and perhaps of adventure in an unfamiliar culture at the encouragement of a former classmate.

For years Brahim has sketched in pencil, always horizons, and he is intrigued by color and by a new medium when he notices Olga's easel in the corner of her apartment. Thus begins an unlikely relationship between the pair, expanding both of their perspectives.

Olga eloquently and often naively records her move to the city, how she gets on with her landlord and building manager, her friendships with colleagues, and the cultural differences she faces. Several observations are left up in the air — Why was Javier sometimes acting strangely? Why did Marina leave a threatening postcard as a joke? — but it's understood that as a personal diary there are some things that Olga will not delve into. She panics when she inadvertently leaves her journal

behind, that someone might have read it.

When the author gently returns us to Brahim in the final part of the book, we find him back in Alhucemas coping with Musa's sudden decline into madness triggered by trauma from his mandatory participation in the Marcha Verde. We observe as Brahim leaves his own dreams behind and searches for his disappeared brother, diligently seeks psychological help for him, brings him back into their home, clothes and feeds him as Musa once did for Brahim following their mother's death, and ultimately becomes his caretaker. In this new phase, Brahim never complains, never voices regret, toils for hours baking bread because his brother is no longer able to.

The lines of this novel echo the lines of Brahim's early sketches: sometimes blurry, sometimes sharp, often in greyscale, rarely in color, but always replete with humanity and the simple companionship of family and neighbors against the backdrop of a region emerging into the post-Franco era. The settings of Alhucemas and Tetouan are shrouded, intriguing. Like Olga, we wish to discover the people and the place, to truly get to know them, but we find it just beyond reach. Brahim, Olga, and this book have lingered in my mind weeks after I turned the final page.