



THE HAND¹

Alberto Ruy Sánchez*

It could have been that Fatma's secret motives were more carnal than many believed and that the strange spiritual presence which some attributed to her had actually been a quiet absence. Because the beauty in Fatma's face, in her whole body, was colored precisely by absence. Her hands held things with the fear of losing them, with strength and at the same time with great care, as if she were also afraid of breaking them. Her lips seemed drawn to shape the sound of the most fragile words and to be moistened biting into the flesh of strange fruits, unknown yet foretold by her mouth. The most intimate appetites seemed to rule the tension in the muscles of her long legs, and to have subtly hidden their urgency under the delicacy of her skin.

She walked as if she always knew where she was going, but she always took her time getting there. Sometimes the absences tracing her figure were so great that she could no longer be seen, and people would pass under her window without perceiving her and would feel the fragility of her presence when they spoke of her. In Mogador it was believed she had one foot in another world and that someone in the distance was, with dark powers, calling to her yet not showing her the way. When people mentioned her, they wouldn't say, "There she is," but rather, "It seems as if she's there." For the rest, "the melancholy Fatma" was something akin to her own reflection: the image of an image in pain, something barely perceptible in the air.

To some, her open window seemed even emptier when she was looking out of it. For Fatma, however, the window was not the box of her *nothings*, as those who saw her assumed it to be, but rather the door that led to all things and to none. It was the con-

tainer from which she drew her thirst for everything, since all the volatile absences that formed the air of her melancholy were rooted in the parts of her flesh most easily pierced by the imagination. Roots that took their heat from the belly and their moisture from the skin.

So often sitting at her window she let her lingering fingers slide over her lips until she herself no longer knew whether her finger moved from one side or the other, for she seemed instead to be plumbing profound depths, provoking the eruption of nocturnal senses, the accelerated moisture of her breath. The sea air she breathed in at the window was the hand that gently touched her inside. Sitting up straight, she would fill her lungs, abandoning herself to the air to feel its progressive pressures within her. At the same time, she let her fingers fall on her throat, painted elongated caresses on her neck that became slightly rounded as they descended to meet the rise of her breasts, which offered to

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¹ This is a chapter from Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Mogador. The Names of the Air*, Mark Schafer [trans.], City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1992, pp. 39-42. Drawings by Lydia Peña González.



reward her with sweet tarrying on the hardness of their summits.

Her fingers follow the rise and fall of all the spirals of her body, coinciding at every moment with the other fingers traveling her body from

inside. They recognize each other through the skin like the points of two burning pins that travel the two surfaces of a piece of cloth and char where they meet. The fingers of the air she breathed at her window gave

her hands the power to set her body afire. It is the same air that draws her legs taut, that creates whirlwinds between her legs, the days' other climate that rises like the tide, that floats indecisively at six in the evening.

What could those who saw Fatma sitting placidly at her window know, if she herself was uninterested in showing the density of what startled her and the pungent flavor of its barbs. For even when she left her house to walk the streets near the dock, seeking to provoke chance with her uncertain steps, to favor an encounter, she would never allow others to imagine they knew those whom Fatma hoped to meet on every corner; what faces and names they had, who it was who inhabited the air pushed by the sea toward her window.

And it could have been that their backs were slightly rippled and muscular, like that of the dyer whom Fatma surprised bathing in the fountain the morning she left her house earlier than usual to get water, or that they had the smooth waist and vibrant breast of the woman she saw running naked over the rocks before entering the sea, or the gray eyes of the twins who played dice in the spice shop, or the arms, rising light as the night, of the slim black woman who sells milk. The arms that disturbed her every time they reached out to hand Fatma a purchase or her change. But only Fatma could know whether the air that was reaching out its hand to her body and cutting her breath short had a name, a single name that could be secretly uttered in joy. **W**

1987 VILLARRUTIA PRIZE FOR BEST MEXICAN NOVEL

Set in an imaginary walled city off the coast of Morocco, *Mogador. Los nombres del aire* (Mogador. The Names of Air) traces the days and nights of Fatma, a young woman who finds herself suddenly seized by desire. As she wanders the city's maze of erotic pleasures, she encounters other desiring bodies and the imaginary worlds those desires create. Here is a vital fusion of Latin American magical realism with the geometric and mystical imagery of Arabic literature, written in a style the author calls a "prose of intensities."

Alberto Ruy Sánchez has written several works of fiction in addition to his well-known art and literary criticism. He was an editor of Octavio Paz's *Vuelta* and is now the Editor-in-Chief of *Artes de México*.

This extremely talented Mexican writer assumes his own Islamic roots in one of the best written novels of recent years. He is truly a painter of dreams, who manages to fuse the most unblemished sensuality with the most transparent spirituality.