Sample Translation

Red Rain

(Rode regen)

by Cees Nooteboom

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Translated by Liedewij Hawke

Island

1

So there was Maria, and Bartolomeu, there was the pine tree and there were three small children. They lived on my Spanish island across from me in a house that belonged to the wife of Juan, who is Bartolomeu's brother. Next door to them lived an old farmer, stooped from years of hard work, who had a son who, if he lived to be old enough, would be just as stooped. The old farmer, who looked like a tree-stump, sold me a piece of land just before he left; he needed the money because his daughter was getting married. After that I would see him in the village now and then, together with his son, and then suddenly never again.

In a way, the two of them were the land itself, a type that seems to have vanished. The land isn't worked anymore because that's no longer worthwhile. It is encircled by other fields that lie fallow as well, small lots marked out by walls of piled stones that take an extremely long time to fall apart. They belong to invisible owners who leave their plots slumbering in the land registers until one day they might be worth more. Building on them is forbidden; I am surrounded by all these small lots full of wild brambles and thistles where sometimes a horse or a donkey is kept for a while, a paradise for tortoises and lizards. Apricots, damsons and lemons have slowly given up the ghost: with their withered stake rows they have become their own memorial monuments. I do nothing about it; until recently I had no water to attend to them all in the arid summers and, besides, they protect my silence. Anyway, I already had my hands full with my garden.

It's been almost forty years since I first came here. The house must have once belonged to a small farmer or a day labourer, it needed altering and raising. It was white, like all the houses here; even the roof tiles had been plastered white with *cal* against the scorching heat of summer. Two things were immediately obvious: water and Maria. Water because it wasn't there, and Maria because you heard her everywhere. I would recognize her voice on my deathbed, a shrill, high sound with which she could call her children back from the end of the earth. She spoke the island dialect, a variant of Catalan, which on the island they actually think is a language. Often the *tramontana* blows here, as does the *xaloc,* and together with the other winds, called by equally beautiful names, they are responsible for the islanders having turned the dialect into a hard language with staccato bursts so they can speak against the wind — a bit like shards of earthenware flowerpots being thrown into a zinc tub. It is wonderful to read. It’s an old language: you feel you are getting letters from the Middle Ages, especially when they are about feudal issues, such as how far away you have to live from a well to receive permission to dig a well yourself. Water is called *aigu* and by that becomes a different substance, something you need to be careful about, with rights and duties attached to it.

2

On islands the world of water is divided into salty and fresh. Sometimes, when I feel the need to get a clear view of the world, I drive to the other side of the island and leave my car near a dilapidated schoolhouse that stands oddly in the middle of the desolation, which is where the steep path to Monte Agueda begins. It’s a stiff climb, not made any easier by the rocks that look as if they’ve been swept down by a banjir. In winter it can storm terribly out here, and then the rain turns the path into a swirling torrent. In summer you walk in the dried bed, which at a mysterious moment suddenly changes into a narrow, paved road. Everyone has occupied this island; it is crowded with puzzling prehistoric monuments of the earliest inhabitants, structures consisting of huge blocks of stone they managed in some way — hard to understand how — to lift on top of one another. Later came Iberians, Phoenicians, Romans, Aragonians and Catalans, and, from North Africa and Islamic Andalusia, the Arabs, who are still called Moors here. Much later, the Dutch passed through as well. The French had a garrison here, my village is named after Saint Louis, once king of France. Eventually the English controlled half the Mediterranean Sea from this place, since the island was strategically so important. But long before that, the sea was continuously scanned from circular watchtowers all along the coast so intruders could be repelled in time. As soon as enemy ships were sighted, huge fires were lit on those towers and a warning about an invasion could be sent like that from tower to tower along the entire coastline.

These towers still stand, as do the ruins of the great fort the Arabs built in 1100 on Monte Agueda. Every so often I go up, a rough, steep path climbing to a height of three hundred metres. The track’s pavement consists of large, coarse stones. I like to think it’s the Romans who laid them. Halfway to the top is a peculiar resting spot; there, among wild shrubs near a ramshackle shed, sits the skeleton of a car from the twenties or thirties. A small tree grows through it now. Over the decades I have seen that car — a Hispano Suiza, I believe — slowly decay. Winter rains have coated it with a layer of rust the colour of dried scarlet blood. Everything that could be salvaged from it has been carried off, only the steering wheel still sticks out from it, straight and awkward, like some desperate sign. No one could possibly have driven that car up to this place, yet there it sits, stranded halfway. Somebody must have been either incredibly stubborn or hopelessly drunk. That gives me something to think about for the rest of the climb.

It’s mysterious at the top. Apart from the English soldiers, a farmer’s family must have lived here once. A few years ago, sheep still roamed, but they have disappeared too. There is a house, just as stripped as the car.

A house showing its innards: there’s always something gruesome about that. Over here was the kitchen, a strip of soot to the crumbled chimney, a discoloration on the wall where once something — a calendar? a portrait of a saint? — must have hung. The spot is filled with the absence of people, the wind races across it. The fig trees bent by the north wind, the well full of stones. And that is another mystery. From here I can see the island’s north and south coasts, literally a sea of water whose salty taste I know. But a well up here? At this height? How deep must it have been dug to draw up fresh water?

Those who lived here had to travel for hours with a donkey to get to the nearest village. The loneliness must have been great, the poverty too, but whoever they were, they did have the world lying at their feet. I see the far-away bays, the steep Cape of Cavalleria with the lighthouse, the pine woods, the fields, distant farms, and on the south side the sailboats on the inconceivably metal blue surface that is the sea.

He who is thirsty thinks about water. Of course, again, I failed to bring enough water with me; I sit on the edge of the dead well and meditate rather dramatically on a verse that has stuck with me, though I can't remember who wrote it: "Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine" — I am dying of thirst by the fountain — and quite naturally my thoughts drift towards the history of my own well. The ownership of my house carried with it the right, shared with two others, to use a dried-up well. The estate agent had taken me to it because a well is a selling point in this world. I could look down a very long way, but there was no water to be seen, only an inverted funnel of piled-up stones, ending in darkness.

So that was my well, but it was next to a small outbuilding belonging to the neighbours and it was dead as a doornail. To reactivate it I needed to have the permission of the two other owners, who would then of course be able to draw water from it too. That was fine with Juan and his brother Bartolomeu, but they didn't want to help pay for it. They already got water from a farmer down the road, who owned a huge *pozo* they were connected to via underground pipes and whom they paid by the hour. The tap would be turned on at both sides and the precious water would flow into their own *cisternas*, where they could also collect rainwater.

A different solution was worked out for me, which is how Bernardo and his mule came into my life. My cisterna could hold 4,000 litres of water. Bernardo would come once a week with a round cask containing 800 litres of water behind his poor mule. He made five trips then, and that would be enough for people, trees and plants for a week. The cisterna was closed up with a heavy iron well cover that I could barely lift. The cover had a ring on it, attached to an old blue rope, an instrument of torture for someone with a back problem. But in the meantime I had with a city dweller’s recklessness put in two young palms (they are now full-grown giants), I had a cypress and a pomegranate — in short, I was suddenly at the head of a plant family I needed to take care of. There was no lack of light, but water had to come with Bernardo, and that was quite a ritual. With a great display of strength he would lift the well cover and then we both stared down into the depths, veiled usually by large spider webs, which I couldn’t imagine *not* ending up in my drinking water, but they have never actually made me ill. What I remember is the ever-present fear of using too much, the lifting of that cover and the iron sound that went with it when you lowered the big, round iron lid again, the hollow, somewhat sinister cavernous space down below, on whose depths shimmered only a small amount of water, covered with a film that didn’t inspire much confidence.

Forty years is a long time, many people disappear in it. You notice this when you concentrate on one subject. Bernardo, the mule, and that little cart with the cask, they have all disappeared. After Bernardo, there was the gardener, whose name I’ve never known. We called him simply Señor, and for the rest we would just say “the gardener.” He had arranged for me to get water, like the neighbours, from a large, far-off well that was the property of a very old man. He came once a week, always wore a straw hat, was a bit slow-witted but exceptionally kind, looked after the water, fiddled around a bit, threw everything he cut away or raked up over the wall into the next lot, which I couldn’t get at with water. But perhaps I should first explain what a wall looks like on this island. The ground here is full of stones, and the only way to get rid of them so you can farm the land has been, for centuries now, to take them out and build walls with them. *Pared seca* is what such a wall is called, a dry wall. Dry, because no cement is involved.

There may be as many as a hundred thousand such walls on the island, and the skill with which they are built is extraordinary. All you need are a lot of stones, two men and a piece of string. The stones differ in size, there must be a place somewhere where they turn huge stones into smaller ones, but usually that isn't necessary. The whole arsenal, big and smaller, can simply be dug out of the ground. A large pile of them lies near the two men, who go and stand a certain distance away from one another, each holding a part of the string. The rest must be the work of judgement and tradition, of knowing exactly what stone to put where, on which other one, beside which other one. The wall comes into being before your very eyes, twenty, thirty, forty metres long, at least one metre wide. Inside, but you can only tell when one collapses, are the smaller stones; they are much lighter in colour because they aren't in contact with the open air. Lizards and a friendly kind of field rat live between the stones, and at the base of the wall, tortoises must have found a way in, although they make sure you never find out exactly where. Only during times of great heat do they come onto the terrace and ask for water without asking.

Sometimes the wall builders also make steps of some sort, two or three bigger stones jutting out crosswise from the wall, not directly above one another, but on a slant, with roughly the space of one step in between, so you can get from one field to the other without going round. On aerial photos it's fascinating, the whole island a geometrical spider web of stone threads, a work of art begun before Christ and which is still being expanded by anonymous artists, nameless builders.

After the gardener with the straw hat came the colossus Francisco, who always had a cigar in his mouth. He would lift up the cover as if it were a feather and peer intently into the depths, his huge bottom sticking out, as though the mystery of the universe could be found down there. He arranged everything with the old man to whom the large well belonged. Water is power here; I didn't fully understand that until I had to call on the man once because something had gone wrong. The process was quite complicated. First Francisco would come to check how much water was left in the well. If it had rained that week, we didn't need much and had a cheap week. As soon as he had sized up the situation, he headed towards the house and turned on a tap below the tall cactus by my study. Then he went on foot to the large well and, once there, opened another tap. A little later I would hear the precious water flowing into my cisterna, one of the most beautiful sounds I know. If the well was completely empty, that concert lasted an hour. The peseta is extinct, as are the dodo, the Dutch 25-cent piece and the dinosaur, but I can still see myself putting the copper coins into Francisco's enormous calloused hands, a gesture that no longer exists either. After a few years, Francisco began to have trouble with that huge back of his and was succeeded by Stefano, the old owner's grandson and future heir to the liquid natural wealth, which is now suddenly worth much less because since last year we have finally been getting water from the municipality.

Spain will always be Spain, so the only person to have water long before us was the *disputada*, who lived not far from me, a socialist belonging to the nobility who sat in the European Parliament and thus got preferential treatment. Gone are the conversations about village politics, the weather and the world. The cisterna is empty, a hollow space under the ground. But the old laws are still in effect because not long ago a woman came to my door to ask permission for something I initially didn't understand. The water main hadn't come as far as her house, and she wanted to dig a well, but because my dead well was a hundred and fifty metres from the spot where she meant to do this, she needed my permission, a written one at that. This led once again to a water consultation with the other neighbours, who had calculated that Stefano's large well was actually cheaper in the long run than the water from the municipality, a problem that was solved in my absence when the municipality simply came and installed pipes and while doing so destroyed a shrubby little tree whose name I never knew, which always bore tiny yellow flowers in September.

Am I happy now? No, I miss my procession of water saints, and I miss the idea that water is something precious. And besides, the municipality has laid the pipes so close to the surface under the path leading to my house that during the hot summers the water is never as cold as when it still came out of the cisterna. Once in a while I look with nostalgia at the massive cover, its rope now gone, a rusty iron circle among all the stone.

3

The dead sometimes leave small marks visible only to those who know them. On the stem of the bougainvillea on the terrace, somewhere high up at a difficult-to-reach spot, there is a patch of black plastic, put there one day by Bartolomeu because Bat, our cat, used to find it a wonderful little area to sharpen her nails on, which the tree, for that's what it had grown into by then, did not enjoy.

Spanish was a foreign language for Bartolomeu, he spoke Menorquin, but because he was shy as well and had only a few teeth left, I had difficulty understanding him. On top of that, he was always sent over by Maria, something he absolutely hated, but if you knew what was good for you, you thought twice before disobeying Maria, so he had no choice. Towards the beginning of October he had to stop by to ask if he could come and pick the *chumbos*, the cactus fruits they call *figues de Barbarie* in France, for his pigs. Now that he is dead and I have finally learned how to peel them without ending up with a hundred hairlike spines in my skin, I still wonder how a pig can possibly relish getting a sharpened scrub brush in its snout. By November I had usually left, but then came a request: whether just once during our absence they could use the old baker's table that is our dinner table. It's a long one, made a great many years ago by someone on the island, with three long smooth boards for a tabletop, a huge drawer, and a number of small tree-trunk pieces for a base. In an earlier century the flour for thousands of loaves must have been kneaded on that table. The first time, I didn't quite understand the request, until it dawned on me that my house would then briefly be turned into a slaughter place: they needed the table as an altar for the *matanza*, which takes place every year in November. I already knew the victim, it had to be the enormous sow living a bit further down at the back of my plot, a solitary queen in a palace of rusty pieces of iron and plastic, who was always so happy when I brought her potato peels and cabbage stalks and who was pampered by Bartolomeu with the orange-golden prickly fruits from my cactus, which she bolted down with voluptuous squeals, needles and all. In the winter, when we weren’t there, he kept up with the weeds. Every year on our return we got a scrawled bill for that from Maria with bizarre invented hours. Bartolomeu chucked everything over the wall too, but for the sake of peace we didn’t dare terminate the agreement.

Maria was — I should say *is*, for although she doesn’t live across from us anymore, we still regularly see her on the path or in the village — a force of nature. In ancient Greece they would have turned her into a not altogether harmless goddess. She didn’t really have many teeth either, but it was out of the question you might not catch what she said: her sound penetrated everything. Short, broad, glowing, shaped as I picture the female figure in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, no neck, bursting with boisterous energy, with a sharp eye that doesn’t miss a thing. Obviously Bartolomeu didn’t have an easy time of it under her rule; his only refuge was the bar in the village where the men play dominoes. He worked in construction and grew a few vegetables on the plot of an English countess and horse-breeder. Right after he retired, he fell over like an oak, probably so he wouldn’t be a nuisance to Maria, or to get away from her. She genuinely grieved for him, which she revealed just once in a few sentences. That was the only funeral oration he got. Even so, it was longer than the one for her brother, which I’ll never forget. I had come back from a long walk and Maria stood by the fence with a face like a signboard. Sorrow was written there. So I had to ask what was wrong.

“Terrible,” she said.

“But what is it then?”

“My brother.”

“Which one?” I knew she had eleven brothers and sisters, but I only knew a few of them.

“The youngest. He has killed himself.”

Then you say that is awful, but you know it isn’t the end of it. A question still needs to be asked, and it isn’t about the how, but about the why.

The answer was amazingly simple and by the way it was uttered left no room for further questions either.

“Era muy moderno.”

That was it, the whole funeral oration. He was very modern. Drugs? Alcohol? Crime?

I’ve no idea, and nothing more has ever been said about it, or about Bartolomeu. They are buried in the village churchyard where everyone, friend and foe, eventually ends up, near the strange roundabout all the dead have passed a hundred thousand times in their lifetime and where we gather during the annual fiesta to watch the gigantic fireworks display that signifies a farewell to summer.

Neighbours

Next door to Maria lived the old gnarled man I called Eumaios to myself, after the swineherd who was the first to recognize Ulysses when he finally returned home to Ithaca. “Across the road” needs to be defined. The village we are part of consists basically of a long street, lined with the church, the *ayuntament* (town hall, breeding ground of seething politics), the two bars, Casino and La Rueda (The Wheel), and all kinds of small shops. Surrounding this is an orderly network of streets that cross one another at right angles. The houses are low, and plastered white. Unlike in the Netherlands, you cannot see in from the outside. Mysterious lives must be going on there. At night, when walking through the deserted streets, you hear the familiar sound of Spanish television voices: the island is connected to the big world beyond the sea. On my side of the village runs the bypass or the Avenue of the Peace, the Avenida de la Pau, constructed to relieve the village of traffic heading seaward. It’s forbidden to build anything really high here, but we already think three storeys is quite high enough, if only because we’ve watched everything being built. The island is full of places where there used to be *nothing*. From the way we pronounce that word you can tell we mean the empty beaches where there are now hotels, secret lanes that have become off-limits to us, progress in short. A few narrow roads branch off the Avenida, they form the beginning of a labyrinth. As you proceed further into this, two cars can no longer pass one another; no one is allowed to build in this *zona agricultural*.

At the end of one of these ever-narrower dirt roads an even narrower road turned off to where Eumaios lived, beside Maria and Bartolomeu with their three children, and across from them us, a man and a woman. Since 1969. It’s still the same man. The woman, called Simone, has been there since 1979. The rest is all in the past because first Eumaios left with his son, then Maria with her tribe. That was a tragedy, I’ll come to it later.

The road, and the world, ends at our place. That makes us rather impossible to find, which is a good thing. A dense tree screens us off: apart from the pig, the donkey and Manuel's roosters we don't usually hear a single sound. Stop! Who is Manuel? Manuel is the son of Juan and the brother of Lisa, who is therefore also the daughter of Juan and the wife of Javier as well and the mother of Isabel who dearly loves the donkey and holds long conversations with it, which the donkey patiently listens to because it knows Isa is an only child of two working parents. Juan, who has a limp but is still perfectly capable of going hunting for *pulpos* out at sea and grows huge pumpkins, is the husband of Josefa, who is the owner of the house of Eumaios and that of her sister-in-law Maria. And the tragedy was that Josefa didn't want to renew Maria's lease. Whoever thinks country life is simple is mistaken. Eumaios had left; his white, Arabic house that forms a whole with Maria's, stood empty. But Maria put up a fight. She was attached to her pine tree, and to the end of the world, just as we were. And we were attached to her, to the long-drawn-out battle cries with which she called her children back from the fields, to the way she spoke to Bat and took care of the water management and to the peculiar bills she wrote once a year for keeping an eye on things. She rode her moped as though it were a charger, gossiped as if she did it for a living, belonged in an epic drama that is yet to be written, and couldn't read. For those bills, she relied on her children, but we didn't find that out until later, by which time she had lost the battle and the pine tree was cut down.

There was a brief interregnum under the good-looking sister of Lisa who moved into Eumaios's empty house and had something going with a *guardia civil*, who'd come home at night with a pounding ghetto blaster. She had terrifically beautiful grey-blue eyes that looked sad after a while, whereupon the guardia disappeared too, and all became quiet again. And now? Now Javier and Lisa live directly opposite, and her brother Manuel in the house next to it, and their lives are my clock. Night duty at the airport (Javier), taking Isa to school (Lisa), coming home at night from his restaurant (Manuel). Their cars mark the silence, which can be deafening out here in the country. I am used to it, there's something to be said for not being all alone in the world. We get tomatoes and melons from Manuel when they are in season and also a few eggs now and then because his roosters start calling out to the first sunlight at half past five, and he thinks that wakes us up too early, which is true. From then on, events are accompanied by Willy, Sark, and the first and the second Tibet. There’s a line by the Dutch poet Theo Sontrop: “The guard dog bays.” Sark, Willy and the two Tibets are and were the guard dogs, and they bark at what they consider events, such as the footstep of a stranger, the bicycle of Joan the postman, and all engine noises they can’t immediately identify. Sark is Javier’s dog, a large melancholy hound that doesn’t like to be petted. He has a deep, hoarse voice and lives in a hidden corner behind their house. He doesn’t bark for our car anymore, but does so at all other sounds, especially the moped of the man who comes to feed his horse, which is called Prince and lives next to my studio. Whenever I am at my wits’ end, I go outside for a moment and we look at each other, or rather I look into the eyes of a fathomless void and she (Prince is a mare) waits for a fig from the fig tree close by. Prince is beautiful, long-legged and black, like all the horses on the island. Horses are a religion here. They are the stars of every village celebration. The riders are called *caixers* and are dressed as in the nineteenth century, with white trousers in boots, a tailcoat and a two-peaked hat. The nobility rides along, female municipal councillors sometimes too, and always the priest, then called *caixer capellá*. They form a long procession headed by a man on a donkey, who plays a high-pitched flute, the *fabiol*. First they go to Mass, and after that the ball begins. The band plays fiery music, always the same. Young men and boys have come from all the villages on the island to dance with the horses and their riders — there is no other word for it. The art is to make a horse rear up for as long as possible. The priest in particular is imperturbable. The boys dance almost directly under his horse, the crowd whoops and roars, the music is high and compelling, the horses’ front legs claw the air. You have to be a good rider for that because at some point those horses need to come down again, preferably without hitting anyone. There are tents on the main street where *pomada* flows freely. That is a potent mixture of lemonade and the gin that was invented here on the island, as was the *mahonesa*, called “mayonnaise” throughout the world for that reason.

Prince’s owner is Manuel and Lisa’s cousin. He drops by every day to groom Prince and ride her for a bit, for which he puts on a special black velvet cap. Then I see the heads of Prince and rider pass at a gallop behind the wall. That usually happens when we are about to have dinner, and because Sark thinks Prince is much too large a dog, he barks at her. Every day. Königsberg had Kant to know what time it was; I have Prince, Sark and the roosters.

Willy, on the other hand, had it in specifically for the bicycle of the postman, who would therefore no longer deliver our mail or that of the neighbours. He was a kind of tangled bale of wool: if you put a stick into it, it would have made a fantastic broom. All you had to do was look at him and he’d roll over on his back, and in the countryside you don’t become any cleaner that way. Willy and I loved each other and, unlike Tibet, Willy was allowed to run free, something he preferred to do at our place. Tibet belonged to Manuel too, but was kept on a very short lead behind the wall. Our love story was brief and intense. He hardly ever barked and was extremely lonely. A German shepherd that hadn’t quite come off, with sorrowful eyes, which didn’t improve when Manuel built him a concrete kennel next to the chicken coop, still with that tiny lead. The kennel was at the bottom of his plot, so I had to sneak out to him at night to give him something, and then I’d almost get knocked down by an orgy of gratitude. If he stood upright on his minuscule lead, he could lay his front paws on my shoulders. He didn’t make a sound then, only a quiet, high-pitched stammering of inconsolable grief. Sometimes I tried to talk about it with Manuel, but he said it only happened in the summer, when he had to be at his restaurant all day. It wasn’t that he didn’t care for him, because when he came home at night Tibet was allowed to run free, and then I’d hear him madly spinning about like a whirlwind and dashing frantically back and forth over the path. I don’t know if it’s Spanish; people in the country have a different attitude towards animals.

Those who leave in the winter lose their right to speak. This applies to the garden and to the neighbour’s dogs. From November on, Sark was allowed to go along rabbit hunting and he was probably less melancholy then. In the winter Manuel’s restaurant is closed on weekdays, and then he went everywhere with Tibet, he said. But after the one summer Willy was dead, and after the next Tibet. I can still see them both, just like Bat. These are the only moments I believe in the hereafter. For years and years, Maria had been bringing Bat food during our absence. She did it, I was told, with a defiant call that began as far as a hundred and fifty metres from the gate. She still couldn’t bear that she’d had to leave her house for her brother-in-law’s children, and this was her way of making known she was still welcome at *our* house. Her only worry was that something might happen to Bat while we were away. I had told her it had gone well for so long now thanks to her and we would never blame her if fate struck at some point and in that case she should bury Bat under the *bella sombra*. Bat found another solution, she simply disappeared one day and never came back. Poisoned, Maria thought, casting a meaningful look towards the house across the road. I didn’t believe a word of it, but one must never get mixed up in a family tragedy, especially not when there is a Maria involved. I hadn’t forgotten how she had come over one day with tears in her eyes and asked if “that lady from the television” who had died in a car accident was a friend of ours. All foreigners know one another, so she came to mourn with us. Only when we went on asking who she was talking about, it turned out to be Grace Kelly. I don’t even think she was relieved when we said we didn’t know “that lady.”

Exit Willy, exit Tibet. I couldn’t understand that after another winter Manuel had acquired a new Tibet, a young dog of immense proportions that would get even bigger, according to him. Now this was a *real* purebred dog, he said, which felt to me like a final blow to Tibet 1. For me, there was still only one Tibet, but I cannot get angry at Manuel. He makes use of the long winters to embellish his house. Some kind of stone owl sits on top of his snow-white roof; he has dug a small pond where goldfish pensively swim about; he tried to cover over the traditional island white with pink, but mercifully we were able to talk him out of it.

Slow days. The English countess squeezes herself with her Landrover between our narrow walls every morning to take care of her horses; on Sundays she competes with them in the horse-and-buggy races in the hippodrome. The donkey that used to stand a long way away has come nearer now and listens, like us, to the long monologues Lisa holds when she gets back from school and her parents aren't home yet. The donkey's name is Paco, and in order to talk to him she climbs on top of a wall so she can be closer to his grey face. Javier rebuilt one of the walls around our house after a great storm, and Lisa gives us an account of her attempts to lose weight and of the stiff exam in health care she needs to pass. We alone are the strangers, who, just when things on the island are settling down after the summer and people relish being back among themselves, are off to the other half of our invisible lives. And because they want us to understand what we are missing then, they took pictures last year of my Mediterranean garden in the snow. Palms, cypress, bella sombra, yucca, cacti, fantastic white beings everywhere, odd snowmen in the garden without a gardener.