

Leaving My Daughter's House · *Maxine Kumin*

I wake to the sound of horses' hooves clacking
on cobblestones, a raucous, irregular rhythm.
Mornings, the exercise boys, young Algerians
from the stable next door, take their assigned
animals into the Forêt de Soignes for a gallop.

In Belgium all such menial work is done
by Arabs or Turks. Barefoot, shivering
in the north light of 8 A.M., I stand
twitching the curtain aside to admire
the casual crouch of small men in the saddle,
their birdlike twitters, their debonair
cigarettes, and the crush of excitable horses
milling about, already lather-flecked.

I know that these skinny colts are second-rate runners.
They'll never turn up in silks at Ascot or Devon.
The closest they'll get to the ocean
is to muddy the oval track at Ostende
for the summer vacation crowd braving the drizzle
to snack on waffles or pickled eel between races.

And no matter how hard I run I know
I can't penetrate my daughter's life
in this tiny Flemish town where vectors of glass
roofs run to the horizon. Tomatoes climb
among grapes in all the greenhouses of Hoeilaart.
Although it is March, the immense purple faces
of last summer's cabbages, as if choleric
from the work of growing, still loll in the garden.

At odd hours in the rain (it is nearly
always raining) I hear the neighbor's rooster
clear-calling across the patchwork farm
where I walk among sheep the height and heft
of ponies. Their gravelly baas rumble
an octave lower than their American cousins'.

What a Crusoe place this is, juicily rained on,
emerald-thick! What a bide-a-wee I visit
playing a walk-on part with my excursion ticket
that does not prevent my caring with secret frenzy
about this woman, this child no longer a child.

The horses are coming back now, making a calmer
metrical clatter in 4/4 time. Tomorrow
when they set out again, arching their swans' necks,
I will have crossed the ocean, gone beyond time
where we stand in a mannerly pose at the window
watching the ancient iron strike flint from stones,
balancing on the bit that links us and keeps us
from weeping o God! into each other's arms.