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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.