

Portrait of My Neighbour Skipping

To judge by the way her body tenses
into the jump, it's as if she believes

that the ills of the world are stranded and bound
in the skipping ropes of little girls—

like this one she keeps at arms' length with the sky
heaped on its back. It's as if she senses

she'd hear, if she put the rope to her ear,
the wickerwork creaking of families breaking,

the static of voices that worms through the carpets
at night in the bedrooms of other girls' houses;

that flows through the skirting boards into our gardens,
and shorts at the rubberwood handles she's gripping.

The way she loops herself there in an arc
and picks up her delicate feet to the rhythmic

snap of the rope explains she is learning
to take things in her stride, and it shows

how different she is from me, whose feet,
at eight, are already too big to negotiate

the cracks in the pavings along our street
under which—listen—a sleuth of bears

is gathering, rumbling out of their lairs
to the snap, like ropes, of their cavernous jaws.