

*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.