How We Met

Not in a smoky club with me in red velvet, décolletage heaving. Not in a bird sanctuary, no glossy feathers floating down around our heads. Not in church, no big-hatted, big-bosomed ladies orchestrating our union. Not on a beach, no starfish, sizzled flesh. No street corner, no streetlamp, no halo of light blessing our moment of meeting forward.

Not in Rockaway, Piscataway, Biscayne Bay or Pismo Beach. No Boston or Brazil. No, instead, picture a sagging sofa in a shotgun grad-student house, keg party where old students check new recruits: wary poets circling each other, fiction writers divvying up plots. Eager, silly, 21, I plop down next to you, extend my hand at the instant you reveal
your hometown, and all I see
is a girl like me spat on by
whites, Elizabeth Eckford
captured in rabid crossfire.

Could they be your family,
your neighbors? But you
don’t stutter, don’t blanch,
don’t redden or shrink in shame.

“Central High, 1957,” you say,
drawing close the hand I pulled
back, pulling me into you,
past all that hurt called history.
Occupational Lies About My Father

Day after day, house after house,
you knocked on the doors of hostile
widows and lonely retirees, brandishing
a suitcase of shining silver knives,

gleaming edges sharp as the cutlasses
you cut cane with in the islands. What
made you think anyone wanted to buy
kitchen knives from a boy in a threadbare
suit and spit-shined shoes, stutter so thick
no one could understand you, so nervous
the few people home in midday silence
slammed doors in your eager face,

smooth hairless face so new to America
you don’t have a driver’s license yet.
You’d board the bus, ride it to the train,
take trains with letters for names until

you got to Brooklyn, haven for so many
like you—so many with steamer trunks
in their basements, ancient relatives
back home, late night dominoes fierce

as fire, as spicy curried chicken, as the knives
you assure these widows they’ll need
to slice meat from bone for the stew pot.
So many ran you off their front steps
with a clang of pots or a shove,
fists high in the air if you dared
set foot on their property again.
You expected so much from these people

who looked like you, talked like you,
were you—that you never stopped
to think how ridiculous a suitcase
full of knives could be, how

blades make strangers of
the closest of countrymen, how doors,
once slammed, do not mean
they’ll open anywhere else.
Jump Rope: A Requiem

The girl who owned the rope
owned the power, queen of the block,

little mistress of the playground, hands
on hips, attitude so grown you’d think

she was someone’s mama, not a pigtailed
girl hoarding lengths of twine in her

bedroom of marbles, jacks hitched
to red rubber balls. The girl who owned

the rope could order other girls
to turn on command—single turns

or double Dutch—arms cranking, faces
covered in shine, barrettes flying,

scabby knees giving way to muddy
sneakers. The girl who owned the rope

never let others borrow it, pouty mouth
twisted into no, it’s mine, willing

to give it up only if some burly
older brother threatened to snatch it.

I wanted to be that girl, but never
was that girl—rope I found in the garage
not thick enough, heavy enough, 
stiff enough for my committee

of sulky girls, my elite preening circle, 
contingent of bubblegum and bruises.