

**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  
caught 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.