2000

High School Lesson

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Jake Sims was to be paddled because he hadn’t known the names of the three kinds of clouds, no excuses.

In front of the class, bent over and facing us:
three hard smacks
for cumulus, stratus, cirrus.

It was a long time ago,
though I’d like to know whether he thinks of it sometimes,
Mr. Lawson looming over him,
telling him to brace himself.

What I remember most
is how red his face got,
red from pain, how he winced as the paddle hit.

How many of us I wonder wished he would cry out?

But he said nothing, sat down and Mr. Lawson continued as if something which had parted for a while had now come back together.

It would be big news
in the hallway soon and everyone was ready
for the bell to ring, maybe Jake
more than anyone else.

Already some of us were whispering,
getting the details right—
Mr. Lawson, for instance,
hanging his coat on a hook,
or Jake staring out
at our faces staring back,
or Mary Bell
putting her hand for a moment
lightly on his shoulder

and how no one budged then,
no one said anything for a while.