

Gregory Djanikian

HIGH SCHOOL LESSON

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.