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Mr. Jones

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Mr. Jones

I rode the elementary school bus, because we lived
just far enough outside of town that I couldn't walk myself.

Each morning I waited by the stop sign,
close enough to the street so I could see

Mr. Jones coming two blocks away, but not so close
that the bus would flatten me like the blue station wagon

that he crushed the year before while backing
into a four-way intersection. Mr. Jones

drove his standard yellow bus on weekdays
in the same mossy flannel shirt and ragged cap,

but each Sunday he took his place
at the front of the 3rd Street AME Church

to practice his true calling in a starched,
white clergyman's collar at the pulpit.

To stay limber between Sundays, he liked to practice
on us, his squirming cargo of untamed souls

in need of an elementary education
and some high-decibel discipline.

So when the 6th grade boys launched
a yo-yo in a perfectly aimed arc

over all 17 rows and hit him
right on the crown of his head,

we pulled over in the chicken-wire fenced
side lot of the local milk-bottling factory

for a 30-minute sermon
on the evils of temptation

and the omniscience of the School Board,
which could always look in on us

through the pinhole lens
of the mounted bus camera.

One day when Alyssa Thompson told him
she was crying because her neighbor had died

in the night of a heart attack, he told her
that liars go to hell and left her standing

on the sidewalk in front of her house
with tears spilling down onto her pink coat.

He puffed up his cheeks, tipped his hat
way back above his blood-shot eyes,

and drove us silently on to school,
rows of vinyl pews hushed and sticky beneath us

with sweat, because he spoke in a tone
that assured us of his connection to God.

I hugged my Little Mermaid lunchbox
to my chest in the 6th row, 1st grade section,

and I prayed that his booming quotations
of Old Testament prophets was never directed

toward me before we were delivered
to our final destination.

Katie Partridge, 2010