

"The Whipping"

The old women across the way
Is whipping the boy again
And shouting to the neighborhood
Her goodness and his wrongs.

Wildly he crashes through elephant ears,
Pleads in dusty zinnias,
While she in spite of crippling fat
Pursues and corners him.

She strikes and strikes the shrilling circling
Boy till the stick breaks
In her hand. His tears are rainy weather
To woundlike memories:

My head gripped in bony vise
Of knees, the writhing struggle
To wrench free, the blows that hateful

Words could bring, the face that I
No longer knew or loved...
Well, it is over now, it is over,
And the boy sobs in his room,

And the woman leans muttering against
A tree, exhausted, purged-
Avenged in part for lifelong hidings
She has had to bear.

--Robert Hayden