Late winter afternoon. The gym bleachers are stuffed not quite shoulder to shoulder with heavyset mothers and fathers, parkas unlash
roosting on the narrow benches. Walking babies zip ponderously back and forth along the footways, clutching soggy Fig Newtons. Eighth
sucking up Mountain Dew and trying on each other’s shoes. Hot little boys bounce up and down like basketballs, wishing they were basketballs, or basketball stars,
or their older brothers, or dragons. The hot little boys shoot out loud dreams like BBs, bouncing up and down incessantly, and the walking babies briefly quit zipping and bounce up and down companionably, and the girls in the corner suddenly scatter, inserting themselves into tight spots next to their parents or scooping up a walking baby and squeezing her till she burps and drops her wet cookie onto her father’s boot. Like poltergeists, two eighth-grade boys materialize on the gym floor wearing whistles. The rumor flies: Nate and Scott are the refs! Sheepishly, the refs pop layups, and the eighth-grade girls snicker sardonically.

The hot little boys clap and bounce up and down and blow earsplitting solos on invisible whistles. The girls drop the babies and regroup in the corner, smirking.
and confabulating. And now the walking babies
shriek, “Bubby!” because here they come,
the seven fifth- and sixth-grade boys of the Harmony School

B-team basketball squad, running heel to heel, full tilt,
circling the outside foul line, glossy blue-and-white uniforms
fluttering from their narrow shoulders, rosy faces glowing,

skinny legs pumping, fluorescence sparkling off bent eyeglasses:
and it’s thrilling and sad and beautiful and painfully sweet:
It’s the Charge of the Light Brigade, and the crowd’s chatter

shivers into silence because, at such moments, a parent’s
throat aches too much to cheer. It’s pride they feel,
but also sorrow, and loneliness, watching their red-cheeked

sons dash so recklessly away in their bright tunics
like they’re galloping toward the horizon.
The moment trembles, fragile as sea foam, and then

crashes and fades when the Athens B-team thunders in
from the boys’ bathroom and the Athens parents
on the other side of the gym let out their ordinary

whoops and howls, and the Harmony cavalry
recedes into a clutter of bench eleven-year-olds
slurping Gatorade, poking each other in the ribs,

and surreptitiously waving at their mothers.
On the floor, the starters fling foul shots in a hiatus
of peaceful chaos, the refs slink into corners
to try out their whistles, the crowd relaxes into vagary until the janitor honks the buzzer, the walking babies yelp, and the season opener erupts:

and in these first seconds, every non-baby in the gym understands that the Harmony B-team is doomed. Like a covey of bewildered little partridges, or Pickett’s boys innocently galumphing up a Gettysburg ridge, our players stumble face-first into slaughter. They fumble every pass, dribble on their ankles, aim layups two feet below the backboard, congregate helplessly under the basket as a fat Athens booby nails yet another three-pointer; and even the refs’ incompetent favors can’t save them. The little boys in the bleachers scowl in starstruck disbelief, and jaded grandparents mutter, “These boys gotta get tough.” Packed together in their corner, the eighth-grade girls shout, “Idiots! Steal the ball!” and “Oh my God, you suck!” and in that instant an alarm, a buffalo instinct, ripples among the parents: an obstinate, unspoken urge to circle their hapless calves, and though the girls in the corner keep broadcasting their brothers’ ineptness, and the hot little boys bad-mouth the scoreboard, and the walking babies wail because they can’t have the ball,
the Harmony mothers and fathers square their feet, 
shift their heavy shoulders, and do what needs to be done: 
they radiate a stream of loyal affection so dense and united 
that the very air begins to smell of love—
not just for their own sons, but for every clumsy, familiar 
body on the floor, for every boy who ever built Lego race cars 
on their carpet or dug for gold in their driveway, for every Scout 
who sold them bad popcorn or collected their Coke cans, 
for every pain-in-the-ass they ever yelled at to stop 
jumping on the beds—and it billows through the gym, this love, 
like a spring mist, or maybe laughing gas, and our boys 
panting on the floor glance up at their parents, goggle-eyed, 
doglike in their relief. They would not be amazed 
to witness their tired fathers stomping onto the court 
in mechanics’ pants and work boots and barricading 
the Athens huns in the storage room until the Harmony boys 
can even-up the score. It’s not that they’re expecting this miracle. 
But love is a solace, though no one in the gym dreams 
of speaking those words. The players are minutes 
into their first game, and already everyone has forgotten 
their glory. The hot little boys expound on good ideas 
for squelching opponents, such as glue and trip wires. Babies 
hiccup and suck dirt off their fingers, but mothers and fathers 
salute every single happiness they see, even after one son
bounces a pass off another’s head, even after a third son carefully hands the ball to an Athens guard like a birthday cake. So when Nate the ref finally figures out how to blow

his whistle and his accidental shriek echoes off the D.A.R.E. posters like a supersonic train wreck, Harmony cheers to beat the band. The game’s already a lost cause,

but joy matters. The parents shift their weight on the hard benches and pull wet babies onto their knees. The girls chant, “Whis-tle, whis-tle. . . .” Athens swishes a second foul shot. And those lead-foot boys in blue lurching hopelessly after the loose ball?
Don’t worry. They belong to us.