

WILLIAM FORD

Distance Learning Circuit Rider

Into the soft yellow and plum-
Colored edges of old Bibles,
I'm driving home, teaching done,
Listening to Mahalia Jackson's
"The Upper Room." It's a prayer
Anyone country would understand.

My students would, some
Who actually went to a small school
And read parts of *Huckleberry Finn*
Or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
Older now, so many of them,
They've left bad marriages
And farms for minimal wages
And this off-campus, part-time
Schooling for the next level up
To a little more respect
And family health insurance.

When I'm not there in the flesh
I see them in the distance
On the sometimes shadowy monitor
Tapping the keys of the keyboard
Or pressing down the speaker bar
To communicate with me
So many miles away
Hoping I've got the word
To solve their language problem
Because the textbook's Eastern
Or Pacific Coast in example,
The middle country missing.

Sometimes I imagine myself
A century earlier on horseback
With a new congregation each week
Thumping my boot on the floor
And clapping hands as a woman raises
Her sweating arms heavenward
For the coming of the spirit, her tongue
Rolling in the good King James—
And that tomorrow I'll baptize
Tonight's saved in the muddy river,
Recalling how the Jordan's sand
Must have turned gold when
The Master himself went under.

In this darkness I see young men
Picking at their faces to stay awake
And women who cannot hide bruises
And who sneak a child in
Though it's against institutional laws
And my own expressed wish.
Many of them work so hard
I sometimes wonder what it would mean
If their constructions could be allowed
To run together without punctuation
As though language were seamless,
Everything joined to everything
As in the best Greek manuscripts.
Biblical scholars have argued forever
Over the placement of a period
Lest life become one long stream
Of consciousness or fragments.