Distance Learning Circuit Rider

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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.

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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.