Distance Learning

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They answered an ad, 
FINISH SCHOOL BY CORRESPONDENCE, 
so now I'm making six bucks an hour 
teaching Practical English 
to Benjy the Seventh Day Adventist who sells 
*The Watchtower* in front of Dunkin' Donuts; 
and to Annabella the third generation 
contortionist in a one-ring circus; 
and to Tim from Nome whose stick dance 
makes fish rush to the surface of the sea. 
Our textbook, revised in 1956, 
calls English a "tool" as if it could conk Satan 
over the head as he slunk out of Dunkin' Donuts. 
Its rules are iron-clad, a chain of I's before E's 
not bendable like the bones in a young body, 
not sprung from monks and slaves and thieves. 
I'm required to teach the text straight, 
as if on a cold night outside Nome 
an Athabaskan could smoke 
salmon with wood from a grammar tree. 
My students are remote as astrophysics: 
stars and particle waves, the phenomenon 
of light traveling over distance, 
constructed from equations I can't trace 
although our textbook ventures that someday 
Americans will send a man into space.