

Grudging Zoom

A Budget by Richard Hague, Delivered via Zoom, March 29, 2021

Over these months of pandemic, I have stayed home, taken unaccompanied power walks around the neighborhood, or worked by myself in yard and gardens: I have not been to a bar, a restaurant (except for carry-out), not even to the campus of the university where I lead a poetry workshop. I am used to such isolation, having lived alone (with the exception of my dog, Dog) in a trailer for many summers in early manhood. Any writer is more inured to solitude than most other folks, for we do most of our work alone at a desk or table, and even when we might write in a semi-social setting, it is usually a library or quiet café, with few interruptions and natural social distancing.

I am also what I term an intermittent ideological Luddite. Aware that even the Amish might allow a telephone booth in a far corner of a field, I may now and then borrow someone's cell phone, but I have vowed publicly never to own such a device.

Why? Because I'm ornery, and will buck the system or fashion when Whim invites me. The more folks try to convince me to join the technophiles, the more I resist, selectively, smilingly. And because I have reasons beyond ideology and temperament. As a classroom teacher during the advent of widespread cellphone availability, I had to deal with students staring into their faintly glowing crotches during my most ardent lectures, and it ticked me off. Once I was approached by the Dean of Students (read Disciplinarian) who asked me, already knowing the answer since he was a former student of mine, "Do you have a Facebook page?"

"No" I answered, "of course not. You know me, Dave."

"Right," he said. "It was just reported to me that a Facebook page in your name was being looked at by some students in the Computer Lab. They were laughing about nasty comments you made about fellow teachers, really nasty. I didn't think it sounded like you, but."

"Never heard of it," I said. "But I am not surprised that such a thing is possible."

"I'll get it taken down immediately," he said, shaking his head.

My regret is that I did not immediately launch into an eloquently aggrieved recruiting sermon to make a Luddite out of him, too.

That said, I can imagine multiple scenarios when my life might be endangered by not having a cell phone. Once, decades ago, my father, who had a history of heart problems, passed out over the hill from our camp in Monroe County, Ohio, in the middle of Wayne National Forest. I wasn't there, but his buddy Don Beam was, and he scrambled up the greenbrier-tangled hill, took off in the car, and drove all the way to the county seat, twelve miles away, to get help. In the meantime, my father came to. When Don and some medical person returned, my dad was sitting on the porch of the trailer, drinking a beer.

At least that's how I imagine it. It's true that he collapsed, it's true that there was no phone, it's true that Don Beam freaked out. The rest is embellishment that makes it more vivid for me, while at the same time making light of the possible cost of my resistance. The story for me is a reminder of a small but crucial little factoid: without a cell phone, I might die when I might otherwise have not.

Never mind that when a friend I'd brought down to that camp in Monroe County, Ohio years ago tried to use his cell phone outside the trailer he found no "bars," as strength of connection was described in those days. It's a remote county, and though our camp was on one of the highest ridges for miles, towers had not yet sprung up on the horizon. Outside of shouting, which my neighbor Ron Daugherty would do to get in touch with relatives far down Foraker Hollow (or to prank me, the city boy) I was incommunicado, in the most bracing way.

I'm partly of the mind that if there's a disaster, it should play fully out. Generally, the blizzard does not suddenly stop and melt. Normally, the flood does not suddenly abate, sucked down and away like the muddled waters of a kitchen sink. The lightning does not recall itself into the cloud or the field from which it erupted. I am fully aware of what the human consequences of this kind of thinking may be, but as a person who remembers that I am physically an animal, I accept that I am not immortal. Technological wizardry has its limits. My living will states that I should not be put on artificial life-support if death is imminent. Isn't a cellphone in a way a sort of artificial life-support device? So go ahead, let me die. And please, bury me in my compost pile, as I have so often implored my frowning family. I am part of everything I've grown and eaten here

for decades; it only makes sense to return it, as nature would do. In this, as in so many things, sense, or reason, or even enlightened self-interest, does not prevail.

So now during the pandemic, people have been driven to overcome the separation required to survive by Zooming—poetry workshops, telemedicine, college courses, virtual cocktail hours—technological fixes that are now as much a part of daily life as lunch, or sleeping. And many of my friends have expressed unqualified thanks for the existence of this technology. After months of physical distancing they say the sight of even my blotchy mug on their screen is a joy. I appreciate the loving hyperbole, and I agree that to see a friend, even this way, is better than not seeing him or her. But something deep in me still recoils at this virtual reality, these poor, flat, disembodied, ersatz second selves.

There is a darkness in nature that is unfathomable. As a reader and re-reader of *Moby-Dick*, I confront on almost every page this fundamental truth. What the light of a million Zoom screens says to me is that in some way, we are engaged in a naïve, even desperate avoidance, as if we can forestall the inevitable by plugging something in. As if we can overcome Leviathan with apps.

In a way, we are cheating during this pandemic. Some of us are dancing in front of a dust storm the size of the planet; others are already treading water in our coastal cities, but we think our networks and circuit boards and some polluting kilowatts will protect us. We are cheating against limitation, trusting technology to fix everything and anything nature raises up before us, and it is foolishness, or worse; it is what Amitav Ghosh calls in his book of the same title “the Great Derangement.” We have lost our minds, unable to think about the largest issues that confront us, climate change, the food problem, the witless habits of building cities on coasts and flood plains. At the same time we are losing our hands—how many people we know could, if they had to, which they may in the not-so-distant future, get a decent garden going? Hunt effectively? Handle a boat or catch fish from it? Better we understand the pain that is here and to come, our own vulnerability and complicity in it, and retreat from our own hubris into a humility that may actually be more powerful and saving than all our technological might.

I am not saying give in to the pandemic. I am saying that it is nature reminding us of how things are. Back off, nature says. Be careful. Acknowledge that you are not

divine. There are things I require of you that you are not giving me: unpoisoned atmosphere and oceans. Sustainable and just extraction of my resources. Sharing and caretaking of them. Acknowledging the rule of Life and Death and Decay and Life Again. Enough room for all life to thrive, which always and everywhere means that death thrives as well. Sometimes we wind up alone. What Covid has reminded us of is that nature has its own ways, and they are not easily, if at all, overcome or outsmarted.

So it is the very seductive convenience of Zoom—and cellphones—that I distrust. They keep us from confronting the death count, the distance that there actually is between us, the humbling perception of the way things really are. I will continue, I suppose, to use them, grudgingly, complainingly, and I will continue to pester my friends with my reluctance.

But we're missing something, distracted by our Zooms, shackled to our phones and computers. Something huge and true and inevitable. I can't say exactly what it is, but I sense it out there, and its presence colors every moment I encounter the image of another, a mere focusing of photons, in what seems to me a kind of cosmic trickery. Can you hear me? No, I mean *you*, not some concatenation of particles and waves, dancing, for a moment, on a screen.

I consider without resolution or comfort the abyssal unplumbable presence of it. The mystery, which we are avoiding.