

The Zoom Experience or 21st Century Salon

by Catherine Whitman

I pour my drink into a mug,
turn on the lamp-light,
open my notebook,
angle the computer safely above the month-old pile of clothes,
and settle in at my desk for class.

It used to be held in Classroom A in the Dudley Lawrence Hall,
but was recently moved to a different room due to unforeseen circumstances.
It's really more of a chat room than an architectural feature,
and really, more of an island than a room.
It is an island that does not exist,
except between the waves of the Worldwide Web.

Class begins. Click. Ding-dong.
Each of us aware of being watched,
visions of each other are suddenly colored
by the posters above our beds,
or the bookcase in a living room,
or, in my case, the oil painting of a weary cow mounted on my bedroom wall.

We recount the tales of our uncles who have been touched by ill and lived to tell the tale,
we describe jokingly, ha ha, how painful it is to live with people,
to live without people.
Most of all, we read. Sometimes we tie up the words and beat them with a hose,
and sometimes we let Neil unwrap them carefully, saving the wrapping for next Hanukkah.

Suddenly
"Laura! Can you hear me?"
Neil stops dead in his metaphorical tracks, scanning the screen concernedly,
casting out a line to save the sinking student.
But a few tense moments later,
Laura is back on the island with the rest of us,
safe and sound.

Soon enough, the sand beneath our feet does not flicker or rely on battery power.
It is made of the wonders of the new world that we enter,
on a class field trip to a different island
where Elizabeth Bishop is king.
The grains are words read aloud, becoming clearer and clearer,
like the sharpen feature on Instagram.
The computer screen is no longer a wall, but a portal.

Then a text ding!s next to Neil's head of an emoji from a friend,
and I answer quickly, then turn back to the island.
In its place is a video chat. I sigh. Check the time.

Well, in any case, even a slightly impersonal one,
It is comforting to know
that poetry does not pause,
Even when the rest of the world does.