

Living in Time

For Phil Salmon

'I am sorry there is no one here to take your call' ...
The voice is poignant, unmistakable;
This is no official announcement of regret
but eloquent of other sadnesses
she would not burden her callers with.

Those who did call on her
as mentor, teacher, friend,
know how little time she had
for fake observances,
scoring academic points.

She spoke her mind,
writing a special kind of poetry
not measured in metre
but in careful cadences
of hard won truth.

In an age of mechanical induction
she drew on memory to teach
the proper usages of grief,
how not to make our grievances
a method of instruction.

She taught us that education
is not business, bureaucracy,
or a football league,
it is where the generations meet
on treacherous uneven ground

often at cross purposes, driven
by fear of failure suddenly revealed
in frantic games of leap frog
over never leveled playing fields
to reach the future first.

Standing there, observing life at school,
she notes the awkward teenager she once was
the one in the end-of-term photograph
with the troubled smile, finding herself
trapped in the lens's public glare

exposed to the gaze
of people who would never know
or care about her private agonies,
the work she had to do,
just being there, on show.

The endgame was no different.
She held her camera lucida
steady, unafraid to look
Mistress Palsy full in the face
and call her bluff ; when others
would have given in
to pity's subtle flattery,
she was made of sterner stuff.

Her style was plain song
not baroque; an elegiac
counterpoint to death's
slow march. Disowning
pre-recorded messages
of shock we hear her voice
ring out again : 'please speak clearly
when you hear the tone'.

No need for grace notes, then,
or flowery tributes, or hired staff
from rent-a-sob; no canned
condolences or choirs,
no churchiness without the spires.

Instead, let us renew her story
as we mourn her loss:

be angry for her
that the days drew in so fast;

hope that endorphin angels
took away the pain, but left her dreams
intact;

be glad at being so apprenticed
to her craft, of learning
how to live in time.

Phil Cohen