

Giving Voice to Others

By William Wright

Book Review:

All of Your Messages Have Been Erased,
by Vivian Shipley. Louisiana Literature P, 2010.



Vivian Shipley begins *All of Your Messages Have Been Erased*, with images of water. In “Nature, red in tooth and claw,” a quote taken from Tennyson’s sprawling ode *In Memoriam*, Shipley describes a scene wherein her son catches a fish and, after a failed attempt to return it to the ocean, decides to clean it. Her son pulls a lobster from the guts of the gargantuan striped bass; then, in a plangent, perfect ending, the poet says, “Blood slicking forearms, his hand probing, Todd / will feel how firmly the heart roots before it gives way.” Despite her visceral conclusion, Shipley manages to let the susurrant undertones of water support an early, personal poem.

However, she also shares with readers female voices that have never been given identity and utterance—narratives heretofore untold. Take, for instance, “Holly Stevens, 67; Edited Father’s Work,” a poem centered on Wallace Steven’s daughter, who, as the title suggests, lived as a ghost in the background of her father’s brilliance. Told in second person and directed at Holly, the poem interweaves words from the father’s poems:

... you lectured about

blue sea glass, how it was rare, rare as your father, an insect
trapped in amber who held your gaze but never satisfied need

for touch, how it was blue as the blue guitar: *Things as they are /
Are changed upon the blue guitar.*

The literary past weaves through the narrative, prolonging the metaphoric half-life of the original poem and enriching the new piece.

In much the same way, celebrating a father, the poem “*A fire in her brain: Lucia Joyce in an institution in Ivry—1907-1982*” creates a touching narrative for James Joyce’s daughter. In this poem, the narrator, Lucia herself, remembers the indissoluble bond she and her father shared. They enjoyed a secret code between them, an anodyne to her mother’s and brother’s cold lovelessness. This attachment also helped allay the familial dysfunction during Lucia’s nomadic childhood, as well as her socially damning strabismus, a crossing of the eyes she endured her entire life. Ultimately extracted from the records of Joyce’s life and all but forgotten, Lucia Joyce’s ghost shimmers on the page, her voice revived, nearly palpable. Even as she invites the coming storm of death, her father remains in her heart:

. . . I’ll welcome death
as cracked earth does a quiet rain. Incas believed warriors felled
in battle came back as butterflies to those they had loved
while alive. Today, there’s a monarch outside my window.

Though this plaintive tone runs through Shipley’s work, the book is not without humor. In “*The Statue, The Death of Cleopatra, Speaks to Me in the Museum of American Art,*” the artwork proves witty:

I notice you are taken captive by my size, articulation
and muscles of my hands and not my bared right breast.
My sculptor, Edmonia Lewis, held up her black palm

to my white one, making our fingers match. Without her,
I might have been a slab hauled by men with dirt caked nails
to a grand hotel lobby in Rome to top a Victorian table.

Though orbiting the image of the Cleopatra statue, this poem is really about Lewis, the first African-American and Native-American woman to achieve fame in the international fine arts world. Even so, Lewis endured hatred and bigotry, and “she kept people at a distance . . . Her need / in a fist,” Shipley writes. Lewis’ words then

become part of the poem: *"I have a strong / sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered."* In revealing Lewis' sympathy, the Cleopatra statue also acknowledges the central achievement of this book: Through conduits as dichotomous as Charlotte Mew and Adolph Hitler's sister, Winifred Benham and Mary Shelley, Shipley's sympathy is genuine; she succeeds in transplanting her voice into other vessels across history, showing a common humanness and need.

The end of the book returns home, to Shipley's own life. In "What Can Be Preserved," the narrator likens the flavor of a preserved lemon to a carefully cadenced narrative, where emotional essences are subtle rather than the acidic and sentimental. In "Missing My Mother's Last Breath," Shipley surprises us with clusters of distantly familiar images:

Her grip, hardening
now, is tight as an osprey's on a striped bass.
There is no light switch I can flip on or lamp cord
I can pull to erase the darkness flooding my heart.