Review: Vivian Shipley All of Your Messages Have Been Erased

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In All of Your Messages Have Been Erased (Louisiana Literature Press, 2010) award-winning poet Vivian Shipley anchors readers deep in the emotional waters of devotion. And Shipley delves into the most complicated kinds—devotion to principle in the face of death, devotion to lover despite adultery, and devotion to one’s own particular vision of the world. Shipley gives us Holly Stevens’ fastidious protection of her father’s memory and work, Paula Hitler’s painful attachment to her brother, and Papusza’s commitment to her Romani community even in exile, just to name a few. By bearing witness to “how firmly the heart roots before it gives way (“Nature, red in tooth and claw” 44) in the lives of the silenced, forgotten, avoided, or misjudged, she asks readers to consider, perhaps even question, their own passionate commitments. These often unsettling threads, in addition to her captivating story-telling, graceful use of language, and astute insight, make this poetry collection haunting—a book certainly not to miss.

Readers will remember Shipley’s narratives because of the clarity and precision with which she tells them. Of this book, Alberto Ríos writes: “Vivian Shipley’s subjects, their places and their circumstances, are rendered... in starkly human terms. These are people from the quieter back page of a newspaper, not the blaring front page. In this way, Shipley reclaims their lives by finding value in them....” Indeed, she gives voice to several Waterbury Clock Company workers who died of radium poisoning, former Alcatraz inmate Jim Quillen, and a judge about to sentence his mistress to death. Passion is the common human currency, and Shipley breathes life into her
personas’ private thoughts as well as their milieus. The effect is multidimensional. Take, for example, “Number Fifty-two: Winifred Benham, Hartford, Connecticut, October 7, 1697,” a poem about the last woman tried for witchcraft in Connecticut. Benham speaks:

“I read Shakespeare, not scripture; I appeared as apparitions, allowing Satan to take my form. Stripped in court, searched for signs of possession, stretch marks where the devil must have suckled were found” (16-20).

Not only does Shipley give Behnam agency in the achievement of her acquittal—a fantastic angle for modern readers to consider—she populates the poem with details of the witch-hunt process—the townsfolk involved, the reasons for accusation, the tools used in court. These details, which other poets may have squeezed out in revision, give readers the rich dimensions of Behnam’s particular life and the politics of her time.

Shipley avoids the dryness that a chain of historical facts can become by maintaining lyricism. “Proud Flesh: Mary Waits for Shelley on the Gulf of Spezia’s Shore” is one of the best examples. In the following lines, Shipley uses subtle repetition of sound and elegant syntax to depict Mary describing her marriage to Percy:

“There were little pleasures—wing shadows, long grass, how you unfolded your body from a chair, how you’d slip stray hair behind my ear as my mother might have. I like to remember the ferry ride circling close by Bellagio, afternoons on Lake Como. It’s been eight years since we met” (41-45).

Further, Shipley brings together the deaths that Mary experienced—her half-sister Fanny, three of her four children, and Percy’s first wife—so that by the poem’s conclusion, the image of “proud flesh” becomes a symbol for Mary herself: “ … proud flesh, a name for scars / on a horse where skin grows back across a wound. / Because it has been tested, flesh underneath is stronger” (46-48). Because of the power of Shipley’s writing, readers feel the ache of the wound as well.
The poet’s style, with its long lines and long poems bound in couplets, tercets, and quatrains—rarely moving beyond the six-line stanza—is graceful and clear. It enables her to reveal narrative and layers of meaning simultaneously. That is, she moves through the personal, historical, social and political realms slowly and intricately, imbuing poems with the impact of a freight train. Take, for instance, “The Statue, The Death of Cleopatra, Speaks to Me in The National Museum of American Art,” which demonstrates Shipley’s ingenious braiding. The poet explores the life of Cleopatra in the context of the statue, using it to tell the powerful personal story of Edmonia Lewis, the statue’s sculptor:

“I notice you are taken captive by the 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” (1-6).

Not only does the beginning demonstrate the link between Cleopatra and Lewis, it also reveals the social history that will emerge—Lewis as a black, female sculptor with superior talent who becomes the victim of an attack by a racist mob. Indeed, Lewis’ story shapes how readers experience this particular version of Cleopatra.

The final section of All of Your Messages Have Been Erased shows how a poet’s own obsessions and regrets—meditations on devotion, in particular—can illuminate the voices of others. In “The First Poem I Have Labeled: Love Poem,” Shipley writes:

“If your body is stripped from me, who will listen to my anger, my sorrow? Last night, when you blew out all the candles on your cake, I strained to find words, compared
you to an hour glass, praising the pile of sand you’d formed
to keep us both from looking at how few grains were left”
(27-31).

The deep love evident in this poem, complicated
by fear of loss, resonates throughout the collection and
emphasizes the emotional connections we share. When
Shipley ends the book with “Mango Season in Cambodia,”
a turn from “annotating my scars, trying to gain perspective/
about my ordinary deaths” (1-2) to the beauty of food—
“As I take in bitter heat / from herbs and wild greens,
sourness of lemongrass” (22-23)—she makes a gesture to
one of the more sensual elements that unite us. This poem
embodies Shipley’s ability to span culture and landscape, the
particular and the expansive—an ability that will cement
this collection in readers’ memories.