

ON CONSIDERING PERSPECTIVES: A DISCUSSION WITH VIVIAN SHIPLEY

by Joey Schumacher

Vivian Shipley is the first writer to be sponsored by *The South Carolina Review*. She serves as editor of *Connecticut Review* while teaching at Southern Connecticut State University as the Connecticut State University Distinguished Professor. Her seven volumes of poetry and five chapbook publications have garnered a variety of awards, including two Pulitzer Prize nominations (*When There Is No Shore* [2002], *Gleanings: Old Poems, New Poems* [2003]). Her most recent collection, *Hardboot: Poems New & Old*, received the 2006 Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement.

Raised in Kentucky, Shipley relocated to Connecticut in 1965, five years before doctors discovered a grapefruit-sized brain tumor that required immediate surgery. After enduring this procedure, she began writing the poetry that would later earn great critical acclaim. Her work flares with regional flavor while also contemplating original and classical profundities. Her honesty and her candid personal reflections intermingle with pieces that rediscover specific and, at times, underrepresented personalities in history. I spoke to her on an early spring evening, moments after she arrived in Clemson, SC to celebrate the *The South Carolina Review's* 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



**JOSEPH SCHUMACHER** (hereafter **JS**): I've been reading a lot of *Hardboot* lately. In "Act IV, Scene iii," you use adaptations of a Shakespearean classic as a vehicle for expressing a very specific emotion. In "Snow," you show skepticism toward Shelley's optimistic foresight when he anticipates the arrival of spring in "Ode to the West Wind," and after doing so, you return to your roots by showing a preference for "Kentucky moonshine, [the] white lightning to jolt [your] bones." How do you balance your love for the canonical authors and literature with this desire to show contemporary, home-grown practicality?

**VIVIAN SHIPLEY** (hereafter **VS**): I guess it's part of my natural personality. I have a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt in Victorian and Romantic literature, and I try to include a lot of my academic background, or my intellectual background, in my poetry. I've always felt that I have many divergent parts of my personality, and I think many of us who have grown up in rural communities or southern country communities have that dichotomy in their personalities. One of the poems in *Hardboot* is about the Elizabethan Club which is at Yale University. It's a very exclusive little club, usually for English majors, and once you're admitted to it, you're admitted for life. There's a \$10 fee, but for life you get tea and sandwiches. I think I'm one of a very few non-Yale members to ever be admitted there because a friend who was a member felt that my literary interests made me belong. Every time I'm in the club, as in the poem I wrote about it, I can't help but think, "If these people knew my relatives, they would just laugh." I guess I always feel that sense of apartness even when I'm in an academic community, even though I am academic. I think

that comes through in my poetry: the two parts of myself.

**JS:** I think it's interesting how you incorporate a lot of these ideas and juxtapose them with this grassroots feeling for where you've come from and what you know.

**VS:** Well, I've always been an extremely focused person. I had my Ph.D. by the time I was 31; I had three young sons; I was divorced from my first husband when my youngest son was six months old, so I was a working, single mother for quite some time, and it was really, really difficult. I've always been and had to be practical about what I did. I think in many ways, I've never had the time or the luxury of really indulging a lot of my, let's say, "literary" interests in going off to retreats and spending summers in France—that kind of thing. It just didn't work into raising three kids.

**JS:** Hopefully, with the success of your writing career, you'll have that opportunity pretty soon.

**VS:** Well, actually, I like to stay home with my husband; we've got two houses, and I like both of them. I enjoy being quiet and trying to write. And, though I have an academic background, I don't think of myself as an intellectual. I don't think that way, I guess. I've always felt, in terms of being in an English department, out of step with a lot of academic people. [*laughs*] I like to be practical and cut to the chase—the "let's get this done" mentality.

**JS:** In the past, you've alluded to the remarkable difference between your life in Kentucky and your life in Connecticut, and I can hear hints of that in your description here. Can you give us a quick illustration of the culture shock from that move?

**VS:** Well, currently, I don't really think I have an overbearing accent, but when I first went to Connecticut, I had just turned 22. When I met people in Yale, which is the culture that I was immediately immersed in, and they heard my accent, they immediately thought I was stupid. Bobbie Ann Mason in a *New Yorker* article some years ago labeled it "the shoe thing," and that's a very accurate description of how people view residents of the Appalachia regions, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee—there's a real stereotype. I think that "hillbillies" are the last group in the United States that is really politically okay to bash. *The Kentucky Cycle*, which was a play on Broadway for some time, is just absolutely vicious about Appalachian people and plays every stereotype that exists there—incest, moonshining, the feuding of the Hatfields and the McCoys—and this, by and large, is not really true. Appalachian people are actually just regular country people.

**JS:** It's something that I think as southerners we have to deal with a lot. I remember visiting family in the Cincinnati area, after having lived in South Carolina for a number of years at that point, and dropping the word "y'all" in front of them. They about lost it.

**VS:** I don't know why, but there is this stereotype that southerners are stupid, and decadent, and lazy and so on. But, they're really complex. It's simply no accident, I think, that probably our very finest fiction and much of our finest poetry has come out of the South. There's so much complexity here that's below the surface.

**JS:** I think it's interesting too how the southern accent is the only one you can find in all 50 states. [*both laugh*] But in terms of location, how do you feel that the shift in your physical location has affected your poetry?

**VS:** When I started writing poetry, I kept it to myself. I see myself, I guess, as what I would describe as a "born-again" poet. After I recovered from the [brain] tumor, poetry was really just pouring out of me. I had to write. It was very inconvenient and uncomfort-

able. My first husband did not like it. He approved of me getting a Ph.D. and being a college professor, but he did not like the poetry. So that was a problem.

For a long time, I tried to *sound* intellectual in my poetry. I used big words, and I don't naturally use big words. I don't have an extensive vocabulary; I grew up with people who actually didn't talk too much. And so I've definitely tried to increase my vocabulary because it's necessary to do so. [laughs] I think the poems I wrote for the first couple of years were incomprehensible to virtually everybody who read them. I sort of knew what I was doing, but I didn't convey it because the poetry was so intellectually heavy. Also, I think that I was personally very unhappy, and I felt trapped. I wasn't comfortable with actually conveying the reality of my life. Of course, when I did later on, it was very liberating. Also, when I slowly started to understand my heritage and feel really proud of it, I started writing about it, and what I tried to do was not only present the ordinariness of it, but the decency and the dignity of it. There are a lot of messages there that I guess are very Victorian. There's hard work, strong family values, and more hard work. People helped each other, people trusted each other.

When we buried both my mother and my father in Howe Valley outside of Cecilia, Kentucky, the whole church got together—it's a little bitty church—and had this big dinner afterward in the church basement. All the people brought food, and I had no idea they were doing that. It was so decent. My sisters and I had not been back there for years, and it was just something for which the women of the church expected nothing in return. It was a very moving thing to do. So I think that there's a lot of value in our heritage. Each of us has something interesting about our backgrounds, about ourselves, that's unique if we'll just concentrate on it and celebrate it.

I don't think I could be blamed for being shy about my background, especially because I had moved into one of the intellectual centers of the world. I've still experienced, during my time in New Haven, a tremendous sense of elitism at Yale. It is, of course, one of the very finest schools in the world, but I'll encounter faculty members, time after time, who say, "Southern Connecticut—where is that?" and I'll simply tell them, "Well, it's a mile from here."

**JS:** Slightly under Northern Connecticut?

**VS:** [laughs] Right. And, when my students go out to mix it up in bars or clubs, they're always suffering from degrading comments from Yale students like, "You must be stupid to go to that school". And so, one of my goals I have as a teacher is to instill a sense of pride in my students about their own backgrounds and heritages and to encourage them to write about it. A lot of my students are first-generation; they have very strong ethnic backgrounds—a lot of Polish, a lot of Italian students—New Haven has been a real melting pot. I urge students to see what is particular to *their* lives and to treat *it* with dignity.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is possibly the most brilliant work I've ever read about how the creative spirit is ground down and about how important it is to encourage the creative spirit and foster it even if the ideas might be extraordinarily out of line. We need to have differences in order to achieve genius. Certainly since 9/11, we have had a tightening of all personal freedoms, especially of speech. It's really rather frightening, and that tightening is increasing since we've had so many incidences of campus violence, in particular the event in Virginia where the student had been a creative writing student. That

kind of violence goes a long way toward censoring and intimidating people. In creative writing classes now, instructors are very aware that even if somebody writes something that's pure fiction, speculative, or imaginative—if it's threatening or violent, action must be taken. That's very anxiety provoking for me because the easiest thing to censor is the mind, to limit it. That kind of censorship is becoming increasingly prevalent. Students would have a lot of difficulty getting a job, for instance, if they did or wrote something radical, and they need to have a job. There's that need for security. I think there used to be much less pressure to achieve economically—to succeed, to conform, to get a job—than there is now. Don't you feel that?

**JS:** Yeah, and it's interesting because I look at some of my peers and I gauge my own motivations, and I *do* feel that pressure. Whether you're talking about a Gen-Xer or a Millennial, I think the process of goal setting and the constant push for increased efficacy dominates our everyday thinking now more than ever. There seems almost to be a race to achieve this American ideal of getting married, having 2.5 kids, buying a large, two-story house, and a fancy car.

**VS:** *Two* fancy cars.

**JS:** [*laughs*] Exactly. And, I've seen some of my peers, who are accomplishing these goals at the age of 26 or 27, come out asking, "Okay, now that I've done that, what comes next?"

**VS:** We are an extraordinarily commercial society. I think we value, and treat like gods, somebody who is flamboyantly obnoxious like Donald Trump. It's the commercial successes that are touted, and the arts really struggle. Literary enthusiasts come together and celebrate themselves with festivals like this one, but by and large in the world, the artists, because most are not really commercially successful, are not treated with a lot of respect.

**JS:** Yes, when that idea becomes a concern for me, I find it interesting to look at the advice of canonical authors, many of whom were able to find that commercial success while staying true to their crafts. Robert Frost is one example that comes to mind. I've noticed that you allude a good bit to Frost's work in your own; are you a fan?

**VS:** I love Frost. [*laughs*] I've read every word that Robert Frost has ever written, and I think he's just an incredibly brilliant poet.

**JS:** In his essay "The Figure a Poem Makes," he spoke about his poetry and his goal to create a "hook" or a moment of revelation for both himself as a writer and for his readers, as well. He explains a poem as "a revelation or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader.... No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." Do you agree with that philosophy?

**VS:** Absolutely. But what Frost does, and it's actually what I try to do, is make the poetry sound simple. When you read Frost's work, it's so beautiful and so seamless. His use of metaphor, especially from nature, is so natural, and it's so perfectly done, that you're not aware that it's happening, and yet it's there. One of his techniques that I emphasize a lot in my poetry is his use of metaphor. In most of the poems I write, I try to find a metaphor for the work. Then, I try to have that metaphor and the idea blend so that the reader doesn't see where I've seamed them together.

**JS:** Your poem "Mango Season in Cambodia" seems to accomplish this goal very well, and you recently won the 2007 *New Millennium* Prize for Poetry for that one.

**VS:** That's a poem that I like and that has received a lot of recognition so far. It's also been nominated a couple of times for a Pushcart [Prize] this year. As I recall, I read an article in *The New York Times Magazine* some years ago about mangoes and the different kinds of mangoes, that I thought was interesting. I also read an article about Cambodian cooking and how it combines the sweet and sour flavors. After my mother died, I was struggling to find a way to express my grief, but also to put my grief in perspective. Hers was a normal death; she was 89 years old, and it was really a blessing that she died, but, then again, that doesn't make it easy. Out of this experience, I was struck by the idea that it's only when you've tasted sadness or tragedy that you can truly savor and appreciate the sweetness of life. And so I thought, "Wow, this would be a good idea to combine with the mangoes in Cambodia." I've never been to Cambodia, so I did quite a bit of research on the country, the people, and brought in some of the history. That poem had more overt political history than a lot of my pieces have. I struggled with that because my husband is forever urging me to write something funny or lighthearted, but I knew I never intended on going that way in this poem. So, when he read this, he said, "Oh no!" [*laughs*].

Earlier, you referred to Frost. Who said writing a poem is like putting ice on a hot stove, and as it melts, it forms a pool of water that carries the ice along the surface. This is what a poem should do; it should carry itself word by word, all the way through as it progresses. That's an important concept for my poetry, because one of my major objectives is to combine the heart and the mind, and it's important to me for a poem to appeal to an emotion, to appeal to the heart, but not in a false or superficial way.

**JS:** Would you say, then, that writing poetry for you is mostly a cathartic experience?

**VS:** I think often it is. The subjects of my poetry have followed the stages of my life, and I didn't really try to publish until I turned about fifty. At that point, I had a massive amount of work because I had been writing all the time. But, if you try to submit your work, keeping track of the places you're submitting and which poems you've sent where can be really time consuming. It's a job in and of itself. I just didn't have any of that time or energy. When I finally did, for a period there it seemed like I had poems coming out of everywhere because so many had accrued. People thought I was just writing all of the time, but I wasn't. These are poems that I'd had for years and that I revised heavily before I started sending them out.

Initially, my poems were very child-oriented, about raising my children and different issues that created. A lot of it was an expression of frustration from being caught by the love I felt for the kids, which was really what kept me from doing the writing. All of it is a time-crunch situation. I think we all experience that with needing to work, needing to have lives, needing to care for other people, needing to interact with other people.

**JS:** Sort of satisfying your own personal obligations as well as the ones focused on those around you?

**VS:** Yes. And then, I went through a period when I really didn't have anything that was disturbing me or moving me to write from a "cathartic" experience, so I started writing poems about other people. But the single theme that I think I've always returned to and find the most interest in are people whose voices have been lost whether because of political persecution—such as the poem I wrote describing a gypsy poet who is banished by her tribe because she allowed some of her poems to be published—or because of psy-

chological reasons—as with Charlotte Mew, who was a British poet who died by drinking Lysol and who had a life of incredible hardship, work, and poverty, which really ground her down. These subjects have attracted me, and I hope that by writing about them, I will further their reputations and preserve the details of their life.

Then, all of a sudden, my parents who did not go to the doctor regularly became very sick. My father had cancer, moved from Kentucky into my home in Connecticut, and I was just obsessed with writing about him. This was obviously a very cathartic kind of experience. After their deaths, I've gone back to my interest in writing about other people, about other lives, because I don't find anything particularly in my own life that is moving me to write. I am drawn to that same theme: subjects that involve peoples' lives that are tragic or wasted in a sense.

For instance, I'm trying to finish a poem right now about Lucia Joyce, who was James Joyce's daughter who lived for forty-seven years in an insane asylum when she was not insane. She died there, and it's very tragic. In another recent poem, "The Statue of *The Death of Cleopatra* Speaks to Me in The National Museum of American Art," I had the information and the interest in writing that poem for maybe four or five years—a very long time. I was very intrigued by Edmonia Lewis, who was our first African-American sculptor, a woman, who died unknown. Nobody knew who she was, when she was born, where she was born; nobody knows really when she died, where she's buried. And her statue, which is now in the American wing of the Smithsonian, is this massive marble depiction of Cleopatra. I also thought the whole story about the statue's history was funny and fascinating, but I couldn't come up with the point of view. I ultimately went back to what I had been avoiding for four years, which is having the statue talk. I couldn't write the poem without doing that. I guess there's something that seems ludicrous to me about having a statue talk. [laughs] But I didn't know what else to do, so I just have this talking statue.

**JS:** You should add that concern to the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" conversation.

**VS:** [laughing] Right.

**JS:** Well, in *Hardboot* you gave us a taste of these alternate perspectives. I'm thinking specifically of "Debris," where you present an intimate portrait of Paula Hitler coping with suppressed contempt for her late brother Adolph during the twilight of her life. Talk about the title of this poem and how it comments on Paula Hitler's role in history.

**VS:** Well, sometimes I think that there's something in the water which one is unaware of—it's like when people choose names for their children and think the name they're choosing is unique until the child enters the first grade. I was interested in Paula Hitler, and I kept thinking of what a bad deal it was to be Hitler's sister—a real bummer, you know? I had a lot of information about her, and she was apparently not a very bright woman, a very ordinary woman, and her brother just completely ignored her. He was really terrible to her, yet she yearned for his love. She was just like a log or a branch swept along by Hitler and cast on the shore.

She lived out her life under another name in a small German town and was always afraid of being persecuted because she was his sister. I think so many lives end up getting destroyed because they are simply where violence occurs even though they are not a part of it—like the suicide bombings in Iraq—where bodies are strewn on the ground like debris.

Right after I wrote this poem, all this detail started coming out in the media, in news

articles about Hitler as a person: his personal life, his background, his childhood, his relatives, and so on. I thought it was coincidental that I became interested in this idea while unaware that all of this public interest was going to surface, as well. But, given that interest, the subject seems timely.

**JS:** Will your next collection of work offer more of these “lost” voices?

**VS:** Yes, they will be central to my next book which will be *All of Your Messages Have Been Erased*. It is scheduled for publication in summer 2009 by Louisiana Literature Press at Southeastern Louisiana University. The editor is Jack Bedell, who published *Gleanings* and *Hardboot*. He has always been a terrific editor right on schedule.

## JOEL ALLEGRETTI

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### LOT'S WIFE

Do you know Bera? He was the king of Sodom.  
 And Abram? My husband's uncle.  
 Do you remember my name? Of course not.  
 You don't recall what no one bothered to record.  
 I will tell you my name is Bad Girl. Wife Who Must  
 Be Disciplined. Woman Who Doesn't Know Her Place.  
 I served my man faithfully. Scrubbing the floors.

Picking sand from the lentils. Roasting the lamb  
 Until the sputtering fat raised blisters on my hands.  
 Breaking my back carrying the water jars.  
 Bearing his children. But he was the righteous one.  
 The good one. Who thrust his daughters before the city's  
 Preening queens. Who believed their virtue less costly  
 Than an angel's backside. Listen. We *all* were Sodomites.

While cattle licked and eroded my haunches,  
 The apples of their father's eye dulled him with wine,  
 Then had their turns with him to continue the line.  
 What could come but a race of drooling, slope-browed idiots?  
 As for me? Know that I *am* the salt of the earth;  
 But as far as you or anyone is concerned, I'm fit only  
 For seasoning the wreckage and bones of the damned.