

Recent Books by Connecticut Poets

Reviews by Christine Beck published in Connecticut River Review 2022

Hindsight 2020

author: Vivian Shipley

publisher: Louisiana Literature Press

God said it to Lot's Wife. Hades said it to Orpheus: "Don't Look Back." Really bad things, like being turned into a pillar of salt or losing your beloved to the underworld will happen if you look back. So, one might be tempted to view Vivian Shipley's latest book of poetry, *Hindsight: 2020* as a dangerous endeavor, particularly as what's looming in the rearview mirror is the Covid pandemic that hit the world in 2020.

To begin with, most of us are thoroughly sick of talking about Covid. There is nothing remotely uplifting about looking back at where we've been since the pandemic began, particularly as we aren't sure where we are going next.

But those familiar with Shipley's work will find her signature style: a wry and engaging deep dive into the confluence of family and the natural world, coupled with an innate curiosity that results in inspiring poetry, even about death. Shipley wrestles with deaths both far back in hindsight and more current. From poems about witches hanged in the 1600s to her sister's recent death from brain cancer, Shipley unflinchingly examines what we love and those we lose.

To be sure, Covid and its effects permeate many of her fine poems. In "No Rehearsal," she approaches Covid with a metaphor about writing poetry:

What I fear is breath, living in a ventilator, will go on
and on unlike a poem whose lines I can choose to end."

In her poem "Adrift," she uses the metaphor of rowing a dinghy to illustrate the conundrum of moving forward while looking back:

I gave myself up to the illogical: to row the dinghy
forward I had to face the stern. Backwards, I
could not see where I was headed. . .

Her poems about the death of her sister, to whom the book is dedicated, are poignant. Mary Alice died, not of Covid, but of a fourteen-year struggle with brain cancer. Yet, at the end, she was isolated due to Covid rules in her care facility so that Shipley could see her only through plexiglass. In "My Sister Isolated by Covid," Shipley writes

I'm unable to quarantine my heart as her lips sag
when I tell her who I am.

These poems, clear-eyed about life and death, still brim with hope and humor. As with all of Shipley's work, her spirit shines through. In poems about teaching her granddaughter Isabella to swim, ice skate, and build a fort, Shipley contemplates the survival of the next generation.

In a delightful poem about punctuation called "Finals," Shipley bookmarks her retirement with a semicolon. The semicolon, it turns out, is an apt metaphor for the present—a time when the worst of Covid may be behind us, but we pause, not knowing what lies ahead. The poem ends:

Not quite a stop but a strong pause,
it's a link to a future offering me the rare
opportunity to have life both ways.

Fortunately for us, Shipley has not been turned into a pillar of salt or suffered her beloved being banished to the underworld. Her poems in *Hindsight 2020* are a welcome addition to her body of distinguished work.

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