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# Pamela Hart's powerful collection of documentary poetry

**By LEISHA DOUGLAS**



*PAMELA HART* STEVE RAGO PHOTO

Pamela Hart credits her former role as a newspaper journalist for teaching her how to write. She first played with the fantasy of writing a novel, but she struggled with the necessary yet artificial act of inventing a plot. Her discovery of Sharon Olds' poetry was a pivotal step in her identity as a poet.

"The idea that you could write and not have to deal with character development, plot, and the narrative arc was kind of awesome," she said. "But I also always felt that [illegible]s a connection between poetry and journalism. You're thinking abo[illegible]er of words. You're thinking about using the strongest and best as well a[illegible]ewest words possible. There's a 'container' aspect to a news story that

can also structure a poem, so it didn't feel like I was going to a foreign country. It just felt like I was entering a different landscape."

**Heart-wrenching**

She thinks her poems are less emotional than those of Olds, an observation that is surprising because her 2019 poetry book, "Mothers Over Nangarhar," winner of the Kathryn A. Morton prize and published by Sarabande Books, is a heart-wrenching homefront war narrative.

The collection of what can be described as documentary poetry is both unusual and powerful for the multiplicity of voices, images, and experiences it encompasses. Inspired by her son's choice to join the military and his deployment to Afghanistan, the book comprises prose poems as well as short and long lyrical forms.

"I think of a book as an art installation or an art exhibition," Hart said. "It is by one artist, but you need some variation. An audience needs variety. In addition, I like to bring together disparate things in my writing."

Initially, she didn't see it as a book, but by experimenting with form, the book took shape.

> Every word is a translation
> Though the wife says the soldier
> might not return in time
> so there's tea and rice cake,
> a photograph of her sons.
> I want to tell her about mine
> in distant deserts
> but decide against the word glow
>
> *— from the Pamela Hart poem "Tea With The Viet Cong Soldier's Wife."*

**Writer-in-residence**

While writing the book, she continued to serve as the Katonah Museum of Art's writer-in-residence, a role she created in 2004 to support the museum's Thinking Through the Arts Education Outreach program, which partners with area schools to teach students to explore the intersection of art and poetry through ekphrastic poetry, poems that reflect on visual art.

She believes "poetry is a great container for teaching all kinds of writing strategies, and it's a visual art, and kids need to learn how to look. Visual literacy is an important critical-thinking skill because we live in a visually driven world. We can practice close looking at a work of art, then take it to the next level, which is to make something out of close looking like a poem."

In 201 rt and KMA decided to expand by developing the Building Bridges prisoı initiative in partnership with the nonprofit Rehabilitation Through the Arts. They obtained consent from the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, secured funding, and were ready to launch the

program at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility when COVID-19 hit. All the prison programs inside were suspended.

Charles Moore, Rehabilitation Through the Arts program director, asked teaching artists to come up with writing and art activities that would be emailed to incarcerated participants. Hart created poetry prompts and then responded to the writers' poems with a personal letter of suggestions and included a similar poem by a well-known poet to inspire further exploration.

She encouraged participants to send more work and was "blown away" by the volume she received throughout 2020. By 2021, the museum and RTA were able to enter both Bedford Hills and Taconic correctional facilities, and later Sing-Sing in Ossining.

Hart enjoys "wooing people with poetry." This sometimes involves working through the negative preconceptions and attitudes that students and teachers have toward writing and poetry.

**Thinking about the world**

She said thinking about poetry is really thinking about the world and employs the following questions to encourage a close looking experience: What do you see in terms of colors, shapes, lines, figures, or form? What does it remind you of from your life? How does it make you feel? When you enter the work of art, what sounds, smells, or tactile sensations are you aware of? What is happening? What do you wonder about, i.e., what more do you want to know about the artist or the work of art?

Answers to these questions become the foundation of the poems that students eventually produce. Whether the act of writing poetry is healing or not, there is always tension between the public and private self, which is inherent to creating poetry and art.

In Hart's case, she decided it was important to write and share poems about the effect of war and conflict on families.

Hart was a 2020 New York Foundation for the Arts poetry finalist and received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in poetry. In addition, she has served as poetry editor for Afghan Voices, the Afghan Women's Writing Project, and As You Were: The Military Review, and as non-fiction reader for Consequence Forum, a journal on the consequences of war and geopolitical violence. Her poems have been published in various online and print journals.

ARTS & CULTURE