

CT POETS' CORNER

The poetry of Pat Mottola

Pat Mottola believes it's important for people to reinvent themselves now and then. She began as a visual artist, but now she is much more prolific as a writer and poet than she was as a painter. Her path toward poetry began when she came across something Leonardo da Vinci said, "Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen." Soon after that, she found a poem that immediately intrigued and inspired her: Kim Addonizio's "What Do Women Want." She began reading more poetry, and felt a personal connection to work by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Mottola began to write. Gradually, she realized that she needed more instruction in writing, so she went to Southern Connecticut State University and earned an MFA in creative writing. She teaches there now, as well as teaching poetry to senior citizens throughout Connecticut. "Poetry is a way to feel alive and connected," she says.

Her poetry has been published in journals across the country. Mottola has mentored Afghan women writers through the Afghan Women's Writing Project. She has served as editor of *Connecticut River Review* and is currently co-president of the Connecticut Poetry Society. She's published two books of poetry: *Under the Red Dress* and *After Hours*. Her work with students has been recognized with the prestigious 2019 CSU Board of Regents Outstanding Teaching Award.

— Ginny Lowe Connors



COURTESY OF PAT MOTTOLA

I Go Back

I go back, Grandfather, to New Haven Avenue, the two-family houses you built with your hands, homes that would house your children's children. I wind my way around the old homestead, the cracked sidewalk lined with Columbine, Lily of the Valley, sweet scents of youth. I climb the stairs to the yard's upper garden, to your pear tree laden with fruit, the fig tree you buried each winter like the words "I love you" held tight in your heart. You were gruff, a man who came to this country alone at 15, arrived through Ellis Island, carried only a suitcase filled with strength. I find the currant bush, pick small red berries, their tartness tasting sweet in my mouth. Grapevines entwine my childhood. I squeeze the bitter skin, suck sweet juice from grapes you used for making wine, the wine that fueled the love and arguments with your sons—my father, my uncles—at Friday night card games you played religiously. "Bless this House" hanging above you on the dining room wall, grandchildren watching TV. In the next room, the women busied in the kitchen, pretending not to hear the shouts of anger and laughter that fertilized memories that would grow, blossom into roses, azaleas, their clustered blooms tight as families who lived together, next door, no weeds among us.

Don't You Miss the Drive-In Movie?

The place where you parked your father's '59 Ford just over the slight rise in the blacktop, attached it to the stand, the one that seemed to spring up from asphalt like a perennial, speakers blooming on either side waiting to be clipped to your window? You turned on the sounds of the old tunes, the ones with words you could understand — *I Got You Babe*, *Wild Thing*, *Light My Fire* — tunes you used to dance to every Saturday night. Remember the roar of the MGM lion just before the double feature began? Those were the days you could go on a cheap date, sit in private and finger your name on steamed-up windows that read like a little black book. Wasn't it swell to park back by the snack bar knowing that no one could peek in as they passed by for twenty-five cent popcorn? Don't you remember the times you would pack your friends in the trunk, sneak past the attendant, spring them quick in the back corner of the lot? Didn't you almost want to get caught? How about *buck night* — ten people crammed in a convertible, the *who's who* of cool. And you, always the last car to drive off, forgetting the speaker on your window, still attached.

I Want to Meet an Old Hippie

I want to meet an old hippie, the kind of guy my mother used to date when her hair was long and straight. I see him in those faded polaroids, tinged with ochre over time—snapshots she hides in an old cigar box in the basement, amid ticket stubs, flyers reminiscing sit-ins, love-ins, half a reefer stashed between thumb-worn pages of her diary. Tie-dyed and blurry-eyed, he picked her up in a Volkswagen bus, neon peace signs sprayed from a can, hair like Jesus, man, *blowin' in the wind*. She wore that brown suede vest, the one that still hangs in her closet, fringed and studded, and bell-bottom jeans that hugged her hips like sky hugs moon, love beads around her neck. I want to go to the Village, or the Haight, and wait on the corner. He'll stroll out, like Dylan, slinging his folk guitar, humming the summer of love inside his head where everything is beautiful. Tell him I'm all grown up now, know how to light an incense stick. He'll look for a match—I'll say *that's me babe*. I'll be the girl with flowers in her hair.

I Called Him Kris

Every Friday night at Sam the Clam's he spun discs on a makeshift stage lit by beer signs that glowed like cheap lipstick. He never took a drink as he sat there watching the dancers bob and weave in their tight jeans and tacky tank tops. I sashayed around him like a gypsy seeking a home, conjured his life in my mind, like a fortune teller. His name was John, but I called him Kris Kringle; he looked like St. Nicholas, his white beard soft as spun sugar, or angels' wings, the beer light above his head a neon halo. His broad belly hung over his waist, bulging between stretched suspenders. One day his heart skipped a beat and I never saw him again. The memory fades in and out like cirrus clouds. I try to imagine where he might be, and I make up his story: found a better life, a better bar, or maybe I merely imagined him sitting there, enraptured within the haze of the smoky dive and slow dancers, conjured him up after too much Tequila. I know he was real. Some days the sky shifts in just the right light, swirls, radiant as a crystal ball, and I see him.

Once Upon a Time

My grandmother read me fairy tales. I sat on her lap and listened to *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, couldn't wait for the part where the prince would come and take them away and they would all live *happily ever after*. Sometimes I would watch my grandmother in the kitchen, see how she would teach my mother to cook just the way she did, the way my father would like it. I wondered if this was before or after their princes had arrived. Cooking, cleaning, serving their husbands, they called this *tradition*. I didn't know then that mothers grow old on back burners, evaporate like steam from a pot of hot water simmered until there is nothing left. Or that daughters don't have to follow recipes. So I read my girl my own version of *happily ever after*, where daughters don't wait for princes. They move to the city, a studio apartment for one with a kitchen drawer full of fancy take-out menus, let down their hair and stir up whomever they choose, at whim.

I Shelve My Lovers Alphabetically

Side by side they fight and bicker over me, the p's, pathetic losers, pushing the s's, those selfish men who never share. I treat them like broken toys, boys I used to love, now useless, taking up space. I try to forget their flaws, or why I needed them, the i's, insensitive and insecure, the j's, jealous of the b's—those bad boys who keep me coming back, a few to whom I almost said I do, when I didn't. And so it goes, the g's groping everyone, the f's fighting back, s's smooth and smug. I watch the good kissers rub shoulders with the liars and losers. I wonder where I found them. Sometimes I cross-reference, move them around just because I can. I sort them out, touch them inappropriately. I can't let go. I should make up my mind, decide who stays. Instead, I keep them all. By the time I get to the y's I run out of space, no room for you, the one I've not yet met, the one to whom I might have said *yes, oh yes*.

The Bird Cage, c.1910

—after Frederick Carl Frieseke

You might forget the cage, gaze instead at my bare shoulder exposed in brilliant sunlight. I flaunt it like a tart, cannot look you in the eye, distract you with my luminescent flesh. The artist painted me to blend with blues and yellows, appear as one with nature. I balance the cage and all its weight on slender fingers. See where they point outside this frame where I have remained since 1910, a pretty thing flung from the brush of a man. My right hand reaches for the latch. Not long now 'til the cage door slips, birds and I are one. Stay, voyeur. Look carefully and watch us as we finally, singing, fly.

After Vietnam

I watch him breathe as he sleeps, fist clenched, dreams fitful, the sound of gunshots close as a sparrow hitting a glass window. He writhes like a snake, shakes off memories of jungle warfare, women and children he killed blind, eyes innocent as an eighteen-year-old soldier living the eleventh commandment: *kill or be killed*. I witness his fits of anger, suffer his hatred for yellow-skinned neighbors, his tender heart preserved in a bottle of hard liquor. I want to go back, remember that boy who held my hand when moonlight was not a rocket's flare—memories that fade like cheap sidewalk chalk. I curse the darkness, blind to the mornings he wakes before me, steps outside to gather a fallen bird—cradled in palms like a land mine—and buries the stiff body from whom he cannot withhold his tears.

Photo of Him

I found it yesterday intentionally by accident. The box said *vintage* and I remembered that priceless sixties gaze. You sent it to me as I waited for some sign you were alive, those blue eyes burning holes through Kodak paper, blinking out reality, can't remember to forget. That war continues in your head with pills to ease your pain, so lonely now you need to be alone. Somewhere in Hanoi you learned to carry guns you traded for your youth. Still vulnerable beneath your strength, what do you guard now? You left your soul behind—it was damned in Vietnam. Those eyes cried past the horror and love of Saigon whores, that cocky smile, the weed you smoked. You came back labeled *damaged goods*, weighed down by all you carried there brought back unpacked with nightmares lacking clarity. As you arrive unstamped like private paper, still clinging to your tags, I know the silent shroud of you, too proud to see yourself alive, the battle scars you hide all locked inside, imprisoned by your fear of freedom, afraid to face the hero you never asked to be.