

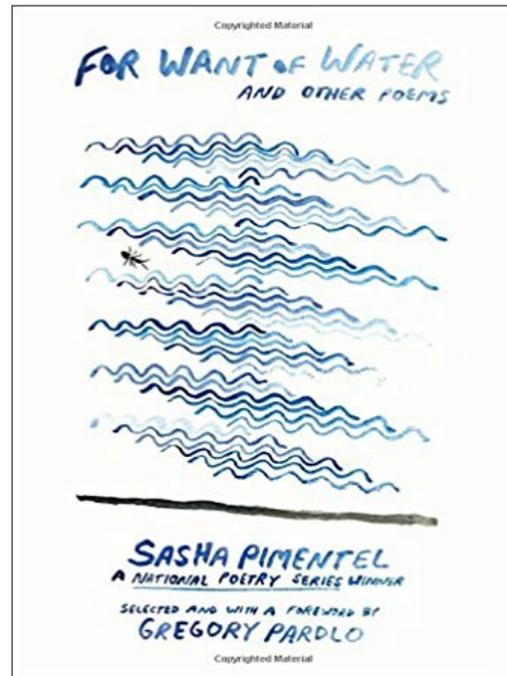
For Want of Water
by Sasha Pimentel
ISBN 9780807027851
Beacon Press
Boston, Massachusetts

Review by Wendell Smith

Sasha Pimentel has anchored this uneven collection with a substantial appendix: "Lines I've Stolen, and Other Notes," as if we might drift with these poems into a sea of vague references unless we were given lots of ancillary and factual information. So, whether you find her to be a good poet or a mature one will depend upon whether you are inclined to quote the apocryphal, "bad poets imitate; good poets steal," attributed to TS Eliot or what he actually wrote, "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal." I do commend these notes for their honesty; they reveal that the best lines in the collection, "as freezing persons recollect the snow:/first chill, then stupor, then the letting go," are Emily Dickenson's, stolen (Sasha's word) from "After great pain, a formal feeling comes —" to conclude her poem "Grave, ma non troppo tratto." Unfortunately the implication of these notes, that the poet has an interest in accuracy, creates an expectation that is often unfulfilled, beginning with the first lyric of the collection, "If I Die in Juarez."

Her casual attention to detail in this first lyric undercuts its power. I give you the complete poem because I feel it is only fair to the poet and to you that I give you enough data to assess the validity of my rant.

*When violins in our home are emptied
of sound, strings stilled, missing
fingers. This one can bring a woman down
to her knees, just to hear again
it's voice, thick as a callus
from the wooden belly. This one strings
are broken. And another, open,
as a mouth. I want to kiss
them as I hurt to be kissed, ruin
their brittle necks in the husk of my palm,
my fingers across the bridge, pressing
chord into chord, that delicate protest —:
my tongue rowing the frets, and our throats high
from the silences of keeping.*



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"My tongue rowing the frets," is a line that triggered my criticism of her craft; violins don't have frets. (If they did, how would a tongue row them!?) Did she choose violins as her metaphor without bothering to acquire a basic familiarity with them? And because of these lines, "my fingers across the bridge, pressing/chord into chord," I doubt that she knows how the instrument is played. Yes, a violin does have a bridge; it elevates the strings above the fingerboard, or top of the violin's neck, so when you arch your fingers over the neck (not across the bridge) and press the strings to the fingerboard, you vary the vibrating length of strings and change their pitch. What is frustrating about this poem is that this metaphor could have served her purpose if only she had been observant and accurate. I give you my clumsy example of what she might have said, "my fingers massaged the neck pressing chord into chord," (or cord into cord) which would have turned the violin's strings into the neck cords of victims to produce the musical "chords" of mourning (or of the morning). Am I unfair to demand that once she chooses her metaphor, which I think we can agree has potential, that she has an obligation to use it with precision?

This poem also demonstrates another problem for this collection caused by the way she anchors the poetry to her notes. In them, after she informs us that the namesake for the title of that first poem is Stella Pope Duarte's novel, *If I Die in Juarez*, she carries on for some 200 words to give us facts about the killings of young women around Juarez and elsewhere in Mexico. Of course these facts are awful and deserving of our attention but I felt they are used here as emotional blackmail, that if I don't praise these poems for their lamentations for injustice, I must be a philistine. This attempt to make her subject the reason to appreciate her poetry brought to mind these lines by Jack Gilbert: ... "To make injustice the only/measure of our attention is to praise the Devil." Would that she had honored that truth and spent as much time examining violins and how they are played as she spent examining the journalism about her subject, and then let the journalism go so the poem could speak for itself.

Here is another example of her lack of precision this time in her use of language in "Old Beds and Hollywood,"

*... My father
slumbered so loudly I could
never hear my mother's
sleep ...

all joists trembled to him
from behind the plaster,*

Those aren't joists behind the plaster they are studs. Her father's room may have joists beneath the floor and joists above the ceiling plaster but it would have had studs behind the plaster of the walls. And if you don't believe me go to a dictionary as I (not wanting to trust my years as a carpenter) did and she should have. And because she didn't she missed the ironic pun of having her father make studs tremble, even as he slept.

Frustrated by how often I found myself going "?! " about poems

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(tongue rowing, vide supra) in this celebrated collection (it is one of five winners in the National Poetry Series for 2016) I went to the title poem, "For Want of Water." There I found evidence for why this poetry has garnered praise and awards. But even this poem begins with another distracting error, "an ant will drown himself." Ants are female; these first lines should read, "an ant will drown herself, her body, etc." This inaccuracy would be trifling were it not that she is so careful in her notes to let us know that the poem is based on a fact: "On August 2, 2006, the El Paso Times reported a case where a 13-year-old boy, Julio Hernandez, dragged his dead mother through the desert after she'd collapsed." Once I got by the male ant of the first three lines, (ironically, because it is a mother who is dead, these lines would have been more powerful if she had gotten the sex of the ant correct) this poem showed that she can transform journalism into powerful poetry:

*an ant will drown himself, his body submerging
into ease, his mandibles, head, antennae, baptized. How lovely
to lose your senses to the cup of your want. A boy
drags his mother's body across the desert, her fluids rising
to heaven in order to quench her skin. How divine
her body must have looked, clutched at the ankles, her
arms reaching out in exultation, her head stippled in rings
of sand and blood as he walked with her, slowly, her fallen
and moving shape the fork of a divining rod, her body shaking
with each of his steps, and for water, shaking to find
that deep and secret tributary.*

Those lines confirm that this collection of Pimentel's does have its genius. If you approach it with a will to dig away like the optimistic boy on the manure pile who felt "there must be horses in here somewhere," you will find poems that are horses. I found some, but came away from this collection thinking that Sasha Pimentel needs to find some one to help her clean the stall, find someone who will be to her what Maxwell Perkins was to Thomas Wolfe.

Finally for the record here are those lines used by Ms. Pimentel to conclude "Grave, ma non troppo tratto." as they appear in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, our best guess for how Emily would have wanted them to appear in print:

*As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —*

I think they answer the question posed by T. S. Eliot's statement. The altering of the capitalization and punctuation as they appear in *For Want of Water* means they are not stolen; they are imitated.

"Brief for the Defense" in *Refusing Heaven*, by Jack Gilbert, Knopf, New York, 2007