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Correspondences everywhere:  
On Robyn Sarah's "Echoes in November"

Echoes in November

Correspondences are everywhere,  
things that shadow things,  
that breathe or borrow  
essence not their own;  
and so the yellow leaves  
that, singly, streak  
in silence past a black  
uncurtained pane  
(catching the lamplight from within  
as they dart down)  
have the elusiveness  
of shooting stars,  
and so it sometimes happens  
that you pause  
in kitchen ministrations,  
knife in hand  
above the chopping board,

savouring, raw, a stub  
of vegetable not destined  
for the pot,  
and faintly tasting  
at the back of the palate  
the ghost of a rose  
in the core of the carrot.

When I received my copy of *Arc*'s "Headless Issue," No. 61, in which all the poems appear without authorial credit, I decided to read through the magazine before consulting the contributors' pages to see who wrote what. For some poems I had a pretty good idea, some I was damn near sure of, others suggested to me a couple of likely candidates, and others still I had no idea. The poem I encountered on page 73, however, broke my resolve. "Echoes in November" is one of those lyrics that seems cut in marble—one of the few that should be—so perfect are all its parts and movements, so deftly does its author string and bend its single sentence over two dozen lines of crisp free verse, moving from abstract opening to concrete visual image to the surprising—to the best of my knowledge completely original—gustatory image that ends the poem. This is a poem of the mind in motion; not the Cartesian dualist mind, nor the Stevensian mind in the realm of near-pure imagination, but a mind fully attuned to the nervous input of its senses—a mind that is part of a body that is part of a world in which all things correspond.

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In the world of contemporary poetry in Canada, there are many correspondences and few degrees of separation between one poet and another. For all my high-minded good intentions, once I read "Echoes in November," I had to know who'd written it. It is so rare that a jaded reader like me is stopped dead in his tracks by a poem—especially in a magazine, where one is wont to see "earlier versions" of poems later finished—that I needed to see if this was an established poet or some hitherto unheralded newcomer, someone I knew or a stranger.

The poem's author was no stranger and no neophyte, but Montreal poet Robyn Sarah. In the interests of full disclosure and in keeping with her theme of correspondences, Sarah and I have known each other since late 2004, when she wrote to me about a review I'd published in *Books in Canada*. Subsequently, she published five of my poems in a guest-edited issue of *The New Quarterly*, and I published her exceptionally moving "On Closing the Apartment of My Grandparents of Blessed Memory" in the 2008 anthology *Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets*, of which I was editor. We've since corresponded—that word again—in sporadic bursts, have twice read together in Montreal and now have a publisher in common. Suffice to say that there are significant correspondences of taste and intellect between us.

George Johnston, a poet much admired by Sarah (she has published essays on his work and edited *The Essential George Johnston*, which, speaking of correspondences, was reviewed—rather weakly I thought—in *Arc* 61), once said: "Poetry that survives in memory will become anonymous. Though it may be strong in personal feeling, it expresses nothing so much as poetry itself." To me, "Echoes in November" is just such a poem. I have caught myself several times, since first reading it, running its last two lines over in my mind. I pick up the magazine often to re-read it. I should have known, in retrospect, that Sarah was its author, for it wears all the hallmarks of her best poetry: clarity, elegance, a musical cadence complementary to the prose sense of the poem, an eye for the telling detail. For all its "Sarahness," however, "Echoes" has none of the tang of personal idiosyncrasy that characterizes—perhaps corrupts—so much poetry that can be, without hesitation, yoked to the ego that spawned it. Its style is unassuming, understated; it is more about listening than it is about talking. More literally, it is a poem about tasting, which Diane Ackerman, in her *Natural History of the Senses*, calls "an intimate sense. . . And how we taste things . . . may be as individual as our fingerprints." Or our poems, however anonymous they might appear. Ackerman also talks about the figurative sense of taste: "People who have taste are those who have appraised life in an intensely personal way and found some of it sublime, the rest of it lacking." A more perfect summation for this poem—think of all the vegetable bits that are destined for the pot—and for Sarah's poetic ethos, I can't imagine.

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If you believe Robert Bringhurst, as I do, when he says that “Poetry is the language of being: the breath, the voice, the song, the speech of being. It does not need us”—if you believe this, then the business of poetry is not so much the willful forging of connections, but the alert recognition of those already latent. A rhyme (correspondence of sounds) or a metaphor (correspondence of things) is effective and affecting insofar as it rhymes with the world, insofar as it does not clang or jar, insofar as it says something so obvious we slap our foreheads for not having perceived it before.

Sarah has said, in an interview with Eric Ormsby, that she tends to favour the poems that “came most spontaneously,” and to “mistrust” those that required hard labour. But most of a poet’s work—most of her “ministrations”—is not tied up in the physical act of writing, but reading. Bringhurst—a poet with whom Sarah has corresponded about such matters—again:

Reading, like speech, is an ancient, preliterate craft. We read the tracks and scat of animals, the depth and lustre of their coats, the set of their ears and the gait of their limbs. We read the horns of sheep, the teeth of horses. We read the weights and measures of the wind, the flight of birds, the surface of the sea, snow, fossils, broken rocks, the growth of shrubs and trees and lichens. We also read, of course, the voices that we hear. We read the speech of jays, ravens, hawks, frogs, wolves, and, in infinite detail, the voices, faces, gestures, coughs and postures of other human beings. This is a serious kind of reading, and it antedates all but the earliest, most involuntary form of writing, which is the leaving of prints and traces, the making of tracks.

“Echoes” is not so much a poem about such reading as it is an instance of it. It’s the same sort of skilled reading a winemaker performs in tending his grapes and in blending his ingredients. It’s the same sort of reading the sommelier performs in isolating and identifying the defining characteristics of a vintage, in naming the flavours of fruit that aren’t literally in the mix, but the essences of which can be sniffed out and savoured.

Poetry, to borrow Sarah's phrase, is a thing that shadows things, that breathes or borrows essence not its own, and is present in all human activities as well as in the non-human world. I've long thought that Marianne Moore made a mistake when she cut her famous "Poetry" down to three lines from its original thirty. Lost in the process was the "distinction" that "when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry." This, and the poem's final sentence, speak to Sarah's "Echoes": "In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, / the raw material of poetry in / all its rawness and / that which is on the other hand / genuine, you are interested in poetry." A nifty resonance, isn't it, Moore's "raw material" and Sarah's "raw, stub"?<sup>1</sup> Moore of course had no way of knowing she'd be dousing the spark-gap of that resonance by revising her poem, but she should have known—clearly did know—that no disjunction between poetry and "the genuine" can be said to exist, properly speaking.

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The opening line of "Echoes" calls to mind a correspondence with another poem that exemplifies such attention-paying and understated technique: Elizabeth Bishop's magnificent poem "The Bight," in which she writes:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up  
 against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,  
 and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,  
 like torn-open, unanswered letters.  
 The bight is littered with old correspondences.

Of the things of the world with which poems correspond, not the least are other poems. Just as Bishop exploits the polysemy of the word "correspondence," so too does Sarah play with the homophony of "pane" and "palate" and the metaphoric multiplicity of the simple syllable "raw." For me, the first line of Sarah's poem was an open window on "The Bight" and the correspondence between the two poems pleased me enormously and enriched my reading of "Echoes." I later asked Sarah if she had Bishop's poem in mind when she wrote hers. "No allusion to "The Bight" was intended," she said. "In fact, I don't remember that particular poem, though I must

have read it at some point.” Sarah’s response is a valuable lesson to critics that their authoritative-sounding pronouncements are as likely to be errors as truths.<sup>2</sup>

But this sort of “error” is also a lesson to poets that once their poem is published, it becomes a piece of correspondence between poet and reader, and the former has no control over what the latter reads into it—because real reading is no passive act of reception. The reader, in fact, often has keener analytical insights into a poem than its author might have. I think most poets have had the experience of a sharp reader pointing out something in their work of which they were previously unaware, but which strikes them as true.<sup>3</sup>

One of the sharpest readers I’ve encountered is Paul Muldoon. Reading *The End of the Poem*, which collects the lectures delivered by Muldoon during his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, I was dazzled by the connections he makes within and between poems. His lecture on Bishop’s “Twelve O’Clock News” is largely responsible for “The Bight” being fresh in my mind when I read “Echoes,” even if it wasn’t so for Sarah when she wrote the poem. Muldoon points out a correspondence between the two aforementioned Bishop poems, and, as he does so often in the lectures, he digs deeply. First, he quotes from a letter Bishop sent to James Merrill:

When I think about it, it seems to me I’ve *rarely* written anything of any value at the desk or in the room where I was supposed to be doing it—it’s always in someone else’s house, or in a bar, or standing up in the kitchen in the middle of the night.

Where Robyn wrote “Echoes” is anyone’s guess, but certainly what Bishop says corresponds nicely with that “pause / in kitchen ministrations,” not to mention that “stub / of vegetable”—reminding us of a pencil stub—that is *supposed* to go in the pot, but doesn’t.<sup>4</sup> Muldoon then quotes from a letter to Robert Lowell in which Bishop says that the Floridian body of water immortalized in “The Bight” reminds her “a little” of her desk. This much Muldoon got from a biography of Bishop by Brett Millier. He goes on to chastise Millier for missing the connection between Bishop’s “correspondences” and the “*Correspondances*” of Charles Baudelaire’s poem of that title, in

which ‘L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles.’” If this seems a bit far-fetched, it bears mentioning that Baudelaire actually appears in “The Bight.” And so his ghost lingers “faintly . . . / at the back of the palate” as a most subtle aftertaste to the reading of “Echoes in November.” And so, I can’t help making these connections.

Speaking of symbols, another correspondence “Echoes” suggests is, to me at least, somewhat surprising. I wouldn’t normally associate Sarah with Lorna Crozier—whereas the former tends toward reserve and decorum, the latter more often embraces exuberance and self-exposure—but it’s hard to come across a carrot in a poem without thinking of Crozier’s “Carrots,” in which the eponymous veggies “are fucking the earth.” A bold, fun poem, almost the opposite of Sarah’s more subtle approach, “Carrots” makes the morphological correspondence of carrot and phallus explicit. There’s no entry for “carrot” in my dictionary of symbols, but it’s hardly a stretch, now is it? The word carrot is derived from a Greek word meaning “horn” or “head,” both words slangily associated with the male member. And, as Diane Ackerman says, “Food is created by the sex of plants or of animals; and we find it sexy.”

The counterpoint to the masculine carrot is the feminine rose. The rose is such a baggage-laden symbol that one could posit no end of correspondences, but for me the one that comes to mind most readily is the celestial rose of Dante’s *Paradiso*. The fusion of carrot and rose thus represents not just the union of flower and root, but of man and woman, base lust and chaste love, heavens and earth. Forget your false dichotomies, this image says: all is one.

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Sarah says of George Johnston’s later poems that, “You could mistake this for free verse, and many probably did.” I would say the same is true of “Echoes,” which, while not sticking to any fixed metrical pattern, is girded by a strong iambic pulse, disguised by cagey line breaks. And if you take those last two lines and run them together, you’ve got an alexandrine, a twelve-syllable line imported into English from French poetry. In the entry for “Alexandrine” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, we learn that:

Most significant for the line's rhythmic structure was the fixed medial caesura, with its accompanying accent on the sixth syllable, which, dividing the line into two hemistichs, made it an apt vehicle for dramatic polarization, paradox, parallelism, and complementarity.

In other words, for precisely the sort of juxtaposed correspondence that Robyn makes in the course of her poem's final twelve syllables. She breaks it 5/7 and not 6/6, but that hardly matters. Nor does it matter if she did this consciously; well-read and well-practised poets will often do things like this instinctively, in the same way that Gretzky could pass the puck behind him, to a winger he couldn't possibly have seen, with uncanny accuracy. Metre, for anyone more skilled than one of Marianne Moore's "half poets," is a matter of music, not an actuarial business of doggedly counting syllables and dutifully placing stresses where they belong.

The alexandrine, according to the encyclopedia entry, was used in English by Spenser as the ninth and final line of his trademark stanza as a contrast "with the eight preceding pentameter lines, giving emphasis and closure to the stanza." And so too it functions in Sarah's poem, which, to borrow Yeats' statement about how good poems end, comes "right with a click like a closing box." Part of what makes those last lines work is the aphoristic detachability—that clickiness—that embed them in the mind. But that alone isn't sufficient to make it a great ending. How many poems does one read in which most of the poem reads like padding wrapped around the hard kernel of single sharp line? Not so here. Part of the closure that Sarah's terminal lines provide is, appropriately, a circling back to the beginning—which has an aphoristically summary quality of its own. Not only does the gustatory image serve the rhetorical purpose of reifying and proving the validity of the poem's opening theorem, but the last line also echoes—of course—the first line beautifully:

Correspondences are everywhere

...

in the core of the carrot.

This isn't just a nifty trick (though it is that, too), but is the heart of the matter—or, more appropriately for this poem, it is the root of care: it is why the speaker is engaged in sacramental “ministrations” and not merely the drudgery of chores (though that, too, would chime nicely with “core”). It is what this poem is about and more broadly what poetry is about. We are accustomed to hearing the word “formal” used to describe set structures of stanza and metre, or diction that is the opposite of casual. But this sort of usage confuses form with structure on the one hand, and with decorum on the other, both of which are trivial concerns. Many of Sarah's poems are rhymed and pretty much all of them are decorous—if your taste runs to Rimbaud, Bukowski or Mayakovsky, this is probably not the poet for you—but this is not what makes them good poems. Plenty of wretched verse rhymes nicely. More properly, form in poetry refers to the melding—the correspondence!—of structure and content into an indissoluble unity, into patterns that aren't merely pretty but which bespeak the shared essence of things.

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- 1 It's also nifty that “raw” is a phonetic twin for the first syllable of Robyn—as if it had been chopped down to a stub. Paul Muldoon makes much of such things in his Oxford poetry lectures—of which, more anon—and I'm not always sure he means to be taken seriously. Make of it what you will.
  - 2 I'm reminded of an earlier exchange with Sarah in which she said that she could see the influence of Peter Van Toorn on a chapbook of mine, when most, if not all, of the poems were written before my first contact with Van Toorn's poetry. So what she read as influence was something more like affinity—a topic about which Harold Bloom has many illuminating insights in *The Anxiety of Influence*.
  - 3 I once had a teenaged CEGEP student ask me why there were so many references to alcohol in my poems. This had never occurred to me before, and I was floored at how perceptive the young man was, so I told him he shouldn't ask impertinent questions.
  - 4 It also puts me in mind of Sarah's prose poem “Grace,” in which an “aging poet” opts to “spend the whole day strolling in the sunshine,” rather than go to the Museum, as he had intended.