

Beauty Breaks In. By Mary Ann Samyn

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Poems Like Tic Tacs: (All Tic Tac Adjectives Apply)

by Kristin Abraham

Three epigraphs greet readers as they open this book: a quote from Ann Hamilton (“*I can’t see it, I can’t see it, and then—*”); a quote from Louise Bourgeois (“*It is a leap of faith to put this in an open space, but I take a chance.*”); and a quote from Jo McDougall (“*Lift the forest floor, slightly.*”).

Often epigraphs can seem fairly disconnected from a book, or at least the relationship between epigraph and text is murky, but Mary Ann Samyn could not have chosen a better introduction to her latest volume. It teaches us much about how we should read the poems and manages to maintain Samyn’s signature use of mystery.

For some readers, the poems may prove to be frustrating at times; lines are often seemingly disjointed from each other, and titles also may seem disconnected from the body of the poems, as in the introductory poem “A Girl Can Imagine, Can’t She, a Girl Can Dream”:

Now then. This won’t hurt a bit. Boys & Girls. Yes, I promise. / Verbs explain how to do it./ This page is full of words in much the same way I can’t sleep some / nights between two and four.

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Imagine the white Tic Tacs, a full box. The little flap of a lid is open (“forest floor”), it’s paper seal broken, but it’s a small opening, as you know, so they are relatively safe from escape (unless you want to shake one out).

Rattle. Rattle. The spaces in between them allows for sound.

I learn in little, pollen-grain intervals, but it soon drips like honey, like *how did I get from here to there? (Slowly.)*

Whinnie the Pooh and a honey tree. This book is like that, like returning to a cozy den, a forgotten, hollowed-out space where we used to store treasures. Bits.

“I’m temper, underneath.”

“Once when I was five, and brutal // my hair a dark note ,”

“Or else, I said to no one in particular. Back off--!”

If you think you know, then you probably don't, thank goodness, or / we couldn't be friends.

The sentences skip from subject to subject, almost as if at the flip of a switch, and other lines introduce new voices (which may or may not be new speakers) to the same poem:

O Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit, O Sister Rose of God, am I not / His Little Question-Mark?

or

If you are experiencing an emergency, by all means, proceed to your / local emergency room.

and

He was dexterous. She was lovely. He was brusque. She was fervent. / He was gentle. She was stormy. (Samyn gives credit to another source for these particular lines / this voice.)

Readers may feel dizzy from the apparent shifting identities and radically different images, and a certain (disorientation) is probably intended by Samyn.

But by no means is this book intending to confuse or to be—for lack of a better word—un-interpretable. Hers is a poetry of “rhythmic gymnastics... which entrances as it perplexes” (from the poem “Suppose We Make That Assumption”).

(TV's another way to dial down the ____.)

On TV while I read:

Blair Witch II

Mythbusters “Shooting Fish in a Barrel”

BCBS Football (TCU vs. Boise State)—My team loses when the quarterback throws an interception in the last seconds of the game. (All bets lost; pay up.)

The Scariest Places on Earth “Haunted Voodoo Cursed Plantation Dare”
—on the “Syfy” channel, which used to be “SciFi.” Who needed that extra letter?
—hosted by Linda Blaire

Twin Peaks —marathon.

Celebrity Ghost Stories

The first poem in the book, “A Girl Can Imagine, Can’t She, a Girl Can Dream” is a very lengthy poem for Samyn. There is minimal white space here, and whereas most of her poems are one page each, this poem is the longest I’ve seen from her; it is nearly two full pages and noteworthy because it teaches readers how to read the entire book; it sets the stage, so to speak, for our understanding of the confusion and interplay of voices. It is almost a map key, the epigraphs being compass points.

Just as the epigraph from Ann Hamilton implies, the poems themselves represent a confusion—of identity and of moments/consciousness for the speakers, a la John Ashbery. This exploration of identity is something characteristic of Samyn’s previous books. These are poems of exploring and questioning:

Even now my mind peeks around the hibiscus / to catch what?—small—love?—scoot

These trees were cut illegally. // Which leaves us what? And why?

“Why now?” the new book wondered. / Because—, I whinnied, / and stamped my foot against the ground.

And underneath it all is a thrumming, powerful tension. This may be the greatest of Samyn’s poetic skills—the ability to make readers feel a poem, in their brains, in their bodies, in spite

What I wish is On TV while I read:

Gone with the Wind

Sleeping with the Enemy

Tombstone —not the cowboy parts, the love parts. Wyatt and his women.

More Twin Peaks

Six Feet Under

Severe bronchial illness while reading, punctuated by wheezing, spasms and seal-coughs.

Other times, reading in bed with broken glasses. Not quite pince nez, missing only one bow. (He stepped on them.)

of any confusion on the surface.

The tension is hiding beneath Jo McDougal's forest floor; it literally builds itself up in the juxtaposition of lines and the white space that appears between them. Sometimes it is clearly self-referential:

*This is my face: frequently human. //
This is the line for joy.*

*The interruption is brief, /
like mercy, // concealed as I am: a
hood of quieter, / a hood of consent.*

It is, as the epigraph from Louise Bourgeois says, "a leap of faith to put this in an open space." The leaps and open space are quite literal on Samyn's page (open white space), and in these moments, the reader finds room to pause and understand, to feel what the speakers feel, a yearning helplessness, loneliness:

*

*one calling out, each nightfall, the
other*

*

(sorry—)

*

begging back.

White Tic Tacs, *Rattle Rattle*. Her words roll around my mouth and click on my teeth, each other.

"dismay, dismay"

"Ave Maria polishes"

"Crunch Crunch Crunch"

"*curl of, curl up—*"

"lip"

"peninsular"

"scurvy"

"sparkle"

"wink"

(Tic Tacs in stages: smooth outer coating, grainy, slim and brittle, quick smooth and gone—)

Reliable Tic Tacs. Work like a charm every time you use 'em/

Although this use of white space is Samyn's great strength, as an avid reader of her work, it is also a slight disappointment for me find it again in this book. The subjects, sounds, tension, and language are familiar, yet disappointing, because they are the major strengths in all of Samyn's prior books and seem to have become almost formulaic. I was hoping to find something a bit new, out of the "norm" from her.

My disappointment is rather short-lived, though. Samyn's book is new for her in that she utilizes white space much more than in previous books; thus, there is more room for tension and emotion, and more of an enactment of the confusion (staccato thoughts) the speakers have.

There are also a few poems that seem to break from the norm of her typical forms—a prose poem, for instance, and the first poem in the book which is the longest poem I have ever seen by Samyn.

In the end, *Beauty Breaks In* is an enjoyable and powerful read; it is good integration of the different strengths and skills prominent in each of Samyn's previous books, and because of that, it is quite possibly her best book to date.

She's holding up her hand in front of her face, her fingers spread wide (as a naïve child would do).

But calculating, I think. The Question is—are the spaces revealing (“lift[ing] up the forest floor”) or are they concealing? And do they conceal the reader or the speaker?

Her last words to me. Her last question (an email).

Last fumble, my answer. Interception?

“Thanks,” then years.

Long-lasting fresh breath.