self-involvement of youth and the myopia of criticism. It may be true that Harwood is no longer an experimental or an avant-garde poet in the sense in which those terms have come to be commonly defined (i.e. out to purify the language of the tribe, out to push the boundaries of what the poem can do, and so on) but it's also true that the joke of such claims is on us, since those definitions are no more adequate today then they ever were. It is felicitous when a poet's work satisfies such criteria at some point in his or her career, but only the purest genius can write the same kind of poem for forty years and get away with it. Lee Harwood is not a pure genius; he is, these days, a singer of beautiful and poignant songs. Like he says, it could be worse.

V. Joshua Adams

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Michael Haslam, *The Music Laid Her Songs in Language*. Todmorden: Arc, 2001. 68pp. £5.95.
Michael Haslam, *A Sinner Saved by Grace*. Todmorden: Arc, 2005. 82pp. £8.95.

In 1895, the Victorian writer F. Anstey had a self-deprecating Lady Rhoda declare, in his *Lyre and Lancet*, that she was "no good at poetry—can't make head or tail of it, some'ow. It does seem to me such—well, such footle." The *OED*, which defines footle in its verb form as "to talk or act foolishly, to trifle or 'potter,'" gives only three examples of its usage, two of which are from Anstey, who was clearly quite fond of the term. It was therefore somewhat surprising when "footle" turned up again quite recently, in the first poem of the Yorkshire poet Michael Haslam's 2001 collection, *The Music Laid Her Songs in Language*:

> I had been following, or so I felt, a futile so-called
> calling, and a false trail, and I had failed.
> Footloose I lay, and heard another sweet cascade
> of little falls, and something solitary, smaller:
> the green withens aura.
>
> There's an air to the wild upland willows.
> Halo To The Sallows. Hello There
> young green yellow willow warbler
> footles through light leafs
> an odd fluff-suited, coloured, call. Subtle
> the way it's fluted this june.
>
> ("Green Withen Aura")

Is this poetry footle? Robert Potts in the *TLS* claimed that in the collection Haslam "comes across as something of a Holy Fool," and certainly it would be possible to draw footling inferences from, for example, his self-confessed desire to make "his life an arcade of continual song." Perhaps Haslam footles; perhaps we all do; perhaps this is no bad thing—for it seems rather delightful that the poem's "yellow willow warbler" footles. But does the poetry footle? And does this collection, along with its "second verse" of 2005, *A Sinner Saved by Grace*, therefore reclaim footling for poetry from the clutches of Lady Rhoda and her clan?

Haslam's poetry certainly has a way of talking somewhat foolingly, if not foolishly. It does so predominantly through word and sound play: alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. Like the warbler who footles through light leaves, the warbler of this music footles through chiming language sounds, whether alliterative—from "following" to "felt," through "futile" and "false," so that "failed" feels inevitable from the second line's "trail"—or assonant—"so-called / calling" to the "falls," through which something "smaller" is heard: the rhyme on "aura" toward which the first five lines seem to have been leading. Or breeding, even: there is an organic quality to this linguistic play that makes one feel as though the words are growing out of each other, sending out roots and shoots that pop their heads above the poetic soil a few lines later. Language itself seems to direct the poem's movement, to be, as Haslam once put it, "working through its own means to divulge and deliver." As readers, we end up pottering along various linguistic garden paths, following trails that, for example, tell us that "withens" are willow trees in West Midlands dialect: the "green withens aura," the "air to the wild upland willows," and the "Halo To The Sallows" turn out to refer to pretty much the same thing. That the internet, a good etymological dictionary, and a map of Yorkshire are so necessary to really read this poetry is testament to the buried logic or subtlety in its fluting.

In both collections linguistic footling takes us somewhere. Sometimes it moves with the innocence of a child's word game (as in the neat elision of *Music Laid Her*'s title poem: "Out in the garden haze and grace elide / with blooms across the park they used to graze"). Often it moves with the muted menace of real fairytales (as when, in *A Sinner Saved by Grace*, internal rhyme leads "cream" and "dream" to give birth to their darker acoustic children, "extremes" and "schemes"). But his footling can also take us somewhere surprisingly funny. "An Ash A She" from *Music Laid Her*, which lyrically compares the falling of an ash tree's leaves and a woman undressing, ends with "She had me so elated but / her cold lips parting checked my peak." It is easy to read this, after the mention of her lips, as the more common (in speech though not necessarily in life) "pecked my cheek." It is with surprise and not a little comic bathos that we realize that this would drastically

mislocate the part of anatomy indicated. Of these bathetic movements, one might comment with Haslam's "Four Balladic Idylls" (*Music Laid Her*) that "A music song so long and aged as this is bound / To sag sometimes." And sag it does, like the checked peak, though often in such witty, self-effacing ways that one waits for moments of bathos almost as much as for moments of startling beauty and penetration. Occasionally they coincide, as when the title poem of *Music Laid Her* shifts from the playful "Gag. Gauge. How to engage with Language / again at my age," to the haunting almost-couplet:

> No superstition, but the setting in a certain light
> of literary fear.
> The sky too quiet now and clear as failure.

At moments like this, one realizes that failure and penetration might be the same thing.

In Haslam's poetry plenty is always being said: voices in conversation shift between gravity and levity, humor and pathos, and even different versions of the same poem. For these publications represent only the most recent drafts of poems that have been circulating in various journals for years. "The High Road Broom / and the soft dethroned," for example, appeared in *Poetry Review* three years before its incorporation into *A Sinner Saved by Grace*. The latest version both talks about and displays the earlier poem:

> Michael called, The High Road Broom
> and the Soft Dethroned a poem.
> I am reading. You are in performance.
> Thus:
> The car was blown along the High Road Broom
> Broom Broom
> The Yellow Broom.
> A Black
> smoke blew from chimney stacks.

Haslam names himself, names his poem, and then reproduces it: the five lines following "Thus" are a near-quotation, with some re-lineation, from the 2002 version, and, in their newly ironic indentation, seem to parody his characteristic word play, nursery rhymes and elaborate punning ("Broom" as both the plant with yellow flowers and the noise that cars make). His own voice thus joins the chorus of self-deprecation that peoples the collections. When he tells us in his prose introduction to *A Sinner Saved by Grace* that "I find my figure richly comic," we both believe him and are glad of it, for the riches he draws out of that self-perception have much to illumine (or show up) in us all.

After all, changes, shifts, reversions, bathetic falls, and an inability to stay at our best pitch form the inescapable texture of existence. Haslam claims in the same introduction that

> I know about illusion/disillusion, ups and downs, elation and the pits, and such cycles as have the shape of a plot. I believe there are what I'd call natural plots, and that we live them, and that the truth I want to tell is the truth of a natural plot, which might be realised in art as a musical truth, in language.

The linguistic and acoustic footling of these two collections thus aims to register in natural plots the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, giving us in language "the illusion and the disillusion, the precoital and postcoital even, bedded in the same line, and the line playing part of a greater boom-bust cycle of discovered shape." Footle, in this case, becomes not only delightful, but daring, and even true. Footle, yes. But such footle.

R.H. Abbott

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Martin Corless-Smith, *Swallows*. New York: Fence, 2006. 101pp. $13

The first twelve pages of Martin Corless-Smith's *Swallows* consist entirely of quotations (one hesitates to call them epigraphs); the rest of the book is strewn with them, within poems, after them, offset at the bottoms of pages. A review in the British online journal *Stride* begins with the claim that "one of the many excitements" of the work is that it doesn't bear "more than passing resemblance to our accustomed expectation of a poetry collection": "after the initial miscellany," one finds "fragments 'From Papyri' and aphorisms attributed to Pseudo-Epiphanius, and later…the fragmentary works of William Williamson.…And, besides, some of the poems appear to be lists, notes, diary entries or cancelled drafts."

That's a fair description of the book, which is precisely why it resembled my accustomed expectation of a poetry collection to a depressingly high degree. Drove after drove of poetry collections written in similar modes are published daily: works made out of footnotes to missing texts; books of poems composed mainly of ellipses; book-length poem fragments overwritten by deletions and grocery lists, actuarial tables and suppressed nautical charts, manuscripts depicting graffiti found etched into the hull of a decommissioned boxcar somewhere in Dinosaur Valley.

In other words, *Swallows* is yet another entry in the highly specialized subgenre of poetry as wink-nudge. A twelve-page section is devoted to a