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

§

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

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"series of poetic fragments and long prose pieces" by the aforementioned Williamson, "a radio operator on a remote Hebridean island" during the Second World War. These were, naturally, "found written on the walls of his weaver's cottage." This persona has duped a few critics even though Williamson manages to quote Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* on "the ipseity of the I," a work not published until 1961. In his previous book, *Nota* (2003), Corless-Smith unearthed a cache of poems from a similar source, the seventeenth-century troubadour Thomas Swan. (*A Selection from the Works of Thomas Swan*, "edited by Martin Corless-Smith," was issued separately as a chapbook. It's Kent Johnson without the radiation sickness.) Williamson and Swan embody Corless-Smith's aesthetics: the affirmation of the self's multiplicity as a conditioned construct. Here is the hapless Williamson musing on the theme in the Hebrides:

> A machine extends the surface of the body. speaking through a machine is in kind no further from the self than speaking through your mouth the voice is the first machine of the self we feel distanced from. We are our hands differently than our voice.
>
> The inside of the body is the same order of existence as the outside. Through fear we privilege the unobserved. The self is a machine. If we do not believe a car speaks for us.

The notion that the subject is not an unfragmented site of rational agency would have ruffled neither Plutarch nor John Donne, but certain of our experimental poets do not cease to be dazzled by news that stays old news. Reread the lines just excerpted. Haven't you read them before—or other lines just like them, distinguishable only in ways you can't be bothered to specify?

I suspect that the ongoing deconstruction of what has always already been thoroughly deconstructed continues to fascinate critics and poets because they can't think of anything else to *say* about contemporary poetry. Take the example of another British poet who is interested in alchemical transformations of traditional pastoral. On the occasion of the publication of J.H. Prynne's astonishing *Poems*, a work that insists upon a considered and intricate critical reckoning, John Kinsella and Rod Mengham discerned in the pages

> a poetry that has always been concerned with much more than the way the individual self understands its relation to the social and natural environments; right at the centre of the reading experience it offers is an encounter with the languages and findings of various disciplines that coincide in demonstrating how the self is formed by processes that often lie beyond the grasp of individual perception and cognition.

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Such a passage, as familiar by now as the lowercase first-person singular pronoun, reveals less about Prynne's work than it does about the impoverished state of a certain critical tradition. For what poetry, ever, has been concerned solely with "the way the individual self understands its relation to the social and natural environments"? Who has ever maintained that the self is formed solely by processes within the grasp of "individual perception and cognition"?

Nevertheless, Corless-Smith's poems at their best are of interest even to those few who are convinced that they have perceived and cognized every last process by which the self takes form. In *Nota* Corless-Smith sometimes sounded a pleasant half-tone, a sort of queerly lyrical background hum:

> here and there in the ocean waste, a swimmer's seen
> violin-fault errs to news
> Can make no head against being material
> The body is her stay (he dips a little musical)
> brain, spleen, myrach, hypochondries
> too hot too cold the brain (a miseryrhyme for the moon)

The verse in *Swallows* isn't precisely better or worse—it's just nearly a hundred pages of more of the same: more grating heteronyms, more struck-through lines, more irregularly channeled seventeenth-century stylings. These devices seemed familiar but interestingly tweaked in the previous volume; here they simply seem like default settings:

> to note the towers of umbelliferae
> attend the thrill of presence
> vanished wren the self
> surfeited to an ecstasy
> authentic glory must translate
> that this survive
> the urgent voice believed its correspondence to reality

And so on. The unintentional effect is to induce in the reader a state similar to that produced by a superficial reading of Tan Lin's "ambient poetry"—without Lin's pop exuberance. In *Nota* Corless-Smith seemed occasionally to poke fun at his own po-face: a quotation of the famous definition of "negative capability," for instance, is followed by the citation "—Keats, *New York Times Book Review*. Sept. 3rd, 2000." If the lines in *Swallows* took themselves any more seriously the book would be too heavy to carry about.

In an interview with Rick Snyder, while discussing Language poetry and deconstruction, Corless-Smith said, "It doesn't kill off the idea of a self to allow it to be seen as a mass of collected information, the way a body is not killed if we talk about vitamins." Apart from the non sequitur of the anal-

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ogy, we might note that while Derrida certainly never posited "the idea of a self" "as a mass of collected information," such a nearly empty formulation does seem characteristic of what we might call the Language poets' vulgar poststructuralism. Corless-Smith rightly complains of an "anti-intellectual" dismissal of Language poetry he discerns in academe, but it is almost a definition of anti-intellectualism to view reductively phenomena that are not reducible to one another. I don't know what is more disheartening: that so many young poets continue to advance a facile critique of subjectivity under the banner of ostensible politico-artistic liberation, or that they believe that setting a bunch of pseudo-philosophical sentence fragments to verse constitutes such a critique.

Michael Robbins

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Sarah Law, *Perihelion*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2006. 116pp. $15

Sarah Law's third book of poetry, *Perihelion*, is full of sequences: a twenty-sonnet sequence about monsters, another ten sonnets about tai chi, and forty ekphrastic poems about Italian Renaissance art and architecture. Each sequence is followed by a cluster of lyric poems that provides the book's soft tissue: pets, pea pods, orbits, oranges, and a rubber club. It is a well-organized book and at points a technically rigorous book. But Law's investigations into her poems' subjects reveal her perceptual distance from them, and as a result readers rarely sense the poems' necessity. *Perihelion* is a book *about* things, not *of* them.

At her best, Law lets the poems' music guide her observations into unanticipated terrain. Take, for example, the opening of "Parting the Wild Horse's Mane," one of the tai chi sonnets:

> I flex on your neck, High Stepper.
> You streak the length of a flank, a taut
> bow of the stars in their fire formation,
> pulsing. Two snorts in the wardrobe,
> luck in the heart, gas in the lock
> of your bone-long jaw. I think
> you must have been hit by a master,
> someone in leather

The poem is wisely tethered to an inextricably local experience; and here Law resists the cosmic or epiphanic in favor of the visceral. The speaker integrates intimations of violence into her childhood memory of feeding a horse. (These lines bring to mind Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan dreaming of

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