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Todd Swift's Eyewear

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**Guest Review: Adams On Figura**

**Derek Adams** reviews

*Whistle*

by **Martin Figura**

*Whistle* is more an epic sequence than a collection, and the poems benefit from reading in order rather than dipping into the book at random. Although each poem is an entity in its own right ('Victor' won this year's Hamish Canham prize), there is an accumulative effect as Figura masterfully places each one before us, like a card sharp slowly showing a winning hand.

Figura gives us a story of family, love, growing up, alienation, madness, murder, abandonment and loss, to rival the novels of **Thomas Hardy**, revealed obliquely through a series of small domestic episodes, the main events peripheral to the poems. This technique is introduced from the beginning of the book, in 'Love Letters' where quotes from his Mother's letters to his Father are interspersed with imagined moments "*...I owe mum / the money out of her insurance, but I will pay it back and besides I had to / have a loose coat. // June stands on the bedroom lino, / wraps her gaberdine coat around her. // She lets the wardrobe mirror / take her dreams and turn them silver.*"

Figura is a professional photographer as well as a poet, and like a poet, being a photographer is not simply something you do, it is something you are. "my first

focus / an iris / an aperture dilating / a click //  
everything is light" *'Born'* firmly introduces Martin  
Figura as the camera that will record everything that  
goes on, but these are not instant snaps, no Polaroids  
here, these thoughts and images have been latent for many  
years "Keep this last film / dark and tightly rolled, /  
hold its tongue / between your teeth;" *'The boy who'*.

A third of the way into the book we find what Figura has  
kept "...inside a box, inside / a padlocked room inside a  
warehouse." Which he will now "carefully brush away the  
dust and look / through their shadows and fingerprints."  
*'The Camera'*.

One night in 1966, suffering from mental illness "...claws  
and tongues, / climb his spinal cord, scrape / at the  
inside of his skull." *'Litany'*, his father murdered his  
mother, as the children slept; an act hinted at in a few  
words "Through the wall, it causes no more than a ripple  
/ on the surface of milk. // My toy soldiers are stilled  
/ and I dream on, not of a pale throat, // a kitchen  
knife, a pyjama cord / pulled tight." *'In my Parents'  
Bedroom'*. *'The News'* gives us not the news but the  
reaction "I am in the middle of the room, / the centre of  
a small universe / equidistant, not just from the walls /  
but the floor and ceiling too."

The book is dedicated to Figura's mother, but it is about  
the strained and estranged relationship with his father,  
its manifesto set out in the mirror poem *'A Good Son'*  
"This is a mercy, and I a good son / You are my father,  
so never alone".

As boy he struggles with his father's foreign roots  
"Every few weeks he would take down the book / yellow and  
black, down from the shelf / and put its words in my  
mouth like a hook" *'Teach Yourself German'*. Martin  
Figura's father came to Britian as a P.O.W. during World

War Two, unable to return afterwards to Silesia, which had become part of Soviet controlled Poland. "Sometimes he comes home with Polish sausage / And a heart from another time and place / He serves it up with pickled cabbage" *'Exile'*

Themes of exile and alienation are explored. Poems that deal with Figura's cuckoo like existence with his uncle and aunt "Walking home from church, my shoes / with the secret compass in one heel /leave animal prints in the snow." *'Snowfall'*, "The family sits round the table / ready for the meal, which is me *'Morning Room'*."

These themes are taken up again in poems where Figura's father Frank is admitted to Broadmoor, where "Crow-eyed nurses watch the faint echo of a man" *'The Bath'* and "Frank moves as if he were full of stones / and the room a river..." *'The Weight'*, and further explored in poems of Martin Figura's boarding school experience "He pulls a face when he concentrates / The other boys have noticed this" *'Strange Boy'*. A teacher breaks more bad news "They've gone to Canada he says – *Uncle Philip and Auntie Margaret.*" *'Afternoon Tea with Father Hugh'*."

Released from Broadmoor, Frank once again finds himself a fish out of water. Figura lays bare the new dynamics of this father/son "I throw a few crumbs, then feel your weight / as you snatch at my barbarous line. // You mouth and mouth as if trying to explain. / All I get is maggoty river-breath. The gilt // of your scales dull in the air. A thumbnail / could easily split your soft underbelly, spill your guts." *'Fish'*."

Here are two men distanced from each other but joined together by a fine line, when it breaks Figura is left bewildered; the five line title poem *'Whistle'*, has the undertaker preparing his fathers body "plumps his cheeks / which purses his lips. // It's as if my father / is

about to whistle."

At the end of the book June is re-introduced, we see the mother separated by death, a disembodied being looking down at the "blurred curvature of the earth," like the final scene in **Kubrick's** 2001. "Below, lines of silver / slowly pull into focus" three rivers (her children) that "... carry her with them" '*Distance*'.

Figura is a skilled poet at home with formal or free verse, he has an ear for rhythm and language that makes it a pleasure to read the poems in this impressive and enjoyable collection.

**Derek Adams** is an award-winning British poet and photographer.