

## Magma Magazine Autumn 2010

### *How Art Works on the Pain Spectrum*

David Morley

*What the Water Gave Me*, Pascale Petit, Seren Books, pb., 64 pp., £8.99, ISBN 978-1-85411-515-7

*Seeing Birds in Church is a Kind of Adieu*, Arlene Ang, Cinnamon Press, pb., 80 pp., £7.99, ISBN 978-1-907090-06-6

***Whistle*, Martin Figura, Arrowhead Press, hb., 76 pp., £10.00, ISBN 978-1-904852-26-1**

..... I've also have a high regard for Arrowhead Press, a similar-sized outfit operating out of Darlington yet whose production values exceed those of major commercial publishers. Arrowhead has produced a range of fabulous poetry books (very often in hardback) and their choices of poets – among them Linda Saunders, Matt Merritt, Jennifer Copley – is always astute. Their publication of the late William Scammell's *Selected Poems* was notable and welcome.

Once again, Arrowhead has chosen expertly in publishing Martin Figura's spellbinding sequence of poems, *Whistle* (I prefer to call *Whistle* a single, total poem, in the same way that *Paterson* or *Gaudete* or *What the Water Gave Me* are total poems). *Whistle* is a nightmare of domestic violence and highly recognisable reality. I think this poem is magnificent and genuinely haunting. While the story is simple, the storytelling is elliptical, spare and fearless. The real-life narrative explores the poet's childhood, his cross-cultural parentage and upbringing, his father murdering his mother, and the consequences of the killing on the whole family.

Figura writes the story in fragments (fragments that work as independent lyric poems). What the poet chooses to scrutinize is significant but what he chooses to leave out achieves a greater resonance for the whole cycle of observations. For example, the murder is not described but only imagined – and only then in passing (in all honesty to a child's perception and memory). The feelings of the child are realised through the recollection of perception; they are not vocalised; this poem does not scream and shout. The writing is not attention-seeking, but it is attentive – even to 'the uncertain image'. This is the whole of 'Vanishing Point' which takes place shortly after the mother has died, the father arrested,

and an uncle is taking the children – temporarily, we find out – under his roof:

The rear window flickers into life as we pull away, the uncertain image of a boy on a bicycle appears, behind him a painted backdrop of the avenue, its sycamore trees and pebble-dashed houses:

Piggotts, Mitchells', Mrs Donnelly's with all its confiscated footballs, her poodle yapping at the fence. Children's games are caught in mid-air, at the height of their action.

Uncle Philip turns onto the busy road. The boy pedals like mad to stay with us, but we stretch away and leave him stranded, disappearing.

Then there is just white light  
and the loose flapping sound  
of a film escaping its gate.

This is scrupulously expressed and rewards even further re-reading as a description of how it feels to have your childhood wholly destroyed; how it feels to be aware of the finality of that obliteration; and how it feels to stare across, as through a film, to a far shore from which you've departed forever. Yet it is all rendered true by the image of those confiscated footballs. Of all the books of poetry I've read this year, *Whistle* is the one that haunts me most. It touches a place within you that will never heal. You push it away like a ghost. You pull it towards you in memory.

**For contributor notes:**

Short version: David Morley's new poetry collection from Carcanet is *Enchantment*. He currently teaches at the University of Warwick where he is professor of creative writing. His website is [www.davidmorley.org.uk](http://www.davidmorley.org.uk)