

**Dennis Must. *Hush Now, Don't Explain*. Coffetown Press, 2014**

Receiving the 2014 Dactyl Foundation Award for literary fiction, Dennis Must's second novel is rich with a style sometimes hard and gritty, sometimes impressionistic and lyrical. Set in the 1930s, this compelling naturalistic novel explores two themes prominent in Must's debut novel, *The World's Smallest Bible*: the struggle for authentic selfhood and the necessity of human aspiration—of dreaming beyond one's present, dark lot. In Must's adept hands, *Hush Now, Don't Explain* takes up more than ordinary happiness. *Hush Now* becomes a thoroughgoing dramatic rendering of the problem of the self, of singularity.

The chief characters in this novel dream of a ticket out of tiny DeForest Junction, home to a railroad roundhouse and a brothel. Here, in the confines of this small burg with such limited opportunity for human happiness, they feel a burdensome sense of stasis and inertia. Who *are* they? Who will they become? As Must reveals, the nature of individual identity involves an intricate web of otherness. One must sort it all out to find one's *self*. Honor, the protagonist, faces gender confusion—what's a woman supposed to be? A whore? Her mother was. How escape such a fate? Young men like Billy Jones, of mixed race, and Augustus Willard, an aging black man, confront white hatred and violence, entrenched in the American mind, systemic in the 1930s. A jazz pianist, Billy longs to find his father as well as his own authentic "tune." To do so, he must leave DeForest Junction, and Honor sets off with Billy to support him in his mythical quest. Mr. Willard, with his valise covered with stickers from cities across America, seems an indispensable fellow traveler to both Honor and Billy.

As Must makes clear, longing and dreaming are essential to discovering one's identity, but one must recognize the difference between fantasy and reality. The movie stars on the silver screen are indeed seductive but ephemeral—"ghosts"—not real. The search for true selfhood can go also amiss if one gets lost in the constructs of others. When Billy adopts the name "Billy Skillet" after having "SKILLET" ice picked on his chest by white racists, he chooses to define himself by others' language—perhaps out of despair, perhaps out of a rare form of bravado: *You christen me with that name? Okay, I'll take it. You see, I choose.* But is this *really* Billy? When he turns into a hack entertainer instead of pursuing the distinguished mission of an artist like jazz pianist Bud Powell, he loses his true path, scolds Mr. Willard. Honor herself continues to fear becoming like the brothel *wemen* who serve men on their backs, just as her mother did. In a sleazy hotel in the Bowery, she tries on the garb of a prostitute, symbolically adopting this particular identity. Is this *she*? We can't help but be led to ask questions of interiority, of the philosophical and psychological status of self—of being: What *is* the nature of being? How pin it down? How fixed is the self? How fluid? In its thoroughgoing delineation of subjectivity, *Hush Now* proves to be a penetrating existential novel.

If the themes of *Hush Now* provoke much thought, the novel is much more than its themes. To appreciate the novel fully, one must savor the language, take one's time, absorbing the power of the syllable, of the finely honed diction. Especially striking are Must's descriptions of setting. Note the three travelers' discovery of urban industrialization, which are at once shocking and mysterious:

With the lights of the city beyond, we sought sleeping quarters outside a furnace room where men wrestled fiery ingots to a cooling platform. The workers appeared miniature, as if to betray how their aspirations had conspired to dominate them.

One might recall Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*. One might be reminded of Dickens' industrialized England in *Hard Times*, of Marxist alienation and the absence of species-life, the cowed-down, miserable existence of the wage slave. Stylistically, Must's language mirrors the best that we find in literary naturalism. Consider:

The locomotives, skyscrapers with their steel beams and trusses, open-hearth furnaces aproning the mighty river, coal rising on small handcars from deep beneath the earth, ore-laden barges, industry on the backside of the cities—it all transcended anything Billy, Mr. Willard, or I had ever imagined. Yet we saw hundreds of men working through the night, tending the maw of these leviathans of commerce.

Note the gritty, concrete quality of this language of the workings of mammoth machinery—and yet how surreal as naturalists, on occasion, are. (Think Stephen Crane—a different machine: the Civil War.) In Must's work there is often an interplay between the close-up and the long-view, between the literal and the metaphorical. The weight of the language resides in the latter, as we meditate on the raw, savage implications of the built environment on the human psyche or soul—of mythic proportions.

This is only one face of the larger world outside of DeForest Junction. There is the drive-in theater in a cornfield in West Virginia where white racist thugs assault Billy Jones. There is the seamy side of the cities the three travel to, the jazz clubs, the cheap hotels. Must describes each with strong visual effect, with lively movement.

On one level, *Hush Now, Don't Explain* reveals the failure of the American Dream to provide a place at the table for those marginal persons who, because of certain conditions of gender, race, or class, are not capable of the pursuit of happiness, promised in the Declaration of Independence. But the novel's emphasis isn't really on the socio-political. A deeply psychological novel, it treats the soul as its major text. Outside of the constraints of others, of bias or prejudice, or custom, what are the conditions for self-transformation? How can one ever separate one's *self*, in one's mind if not anywhere else, from the influences of others? From the pull of the past? How can one come to know who one really *is*? This prize-winning novel makes us ask such questions, and it's a rare novel that tasks itself with this sort of inquiry into the complex nature of singularity.

**Jack Smith**