Robert Martens, *Hush.* Victoria: Ecstasis Editions, 2016. Pp. 125. Softcover, $23.95.

The four sections of Robert Martens' *Hush* are distinct enough that one could imagine them published as four chapbooks of poems—though one would be almost book-length in itself, and two others just a dozen pages or so. Bound together, however, these varied subjects and modes are drawn by Martens' deft, unassuming, slightly world-weary voice into a satisfying and rewarding whole.

The first part is "hush," after the title (the poems and titles generally eschew capital letters). These are night poems—lullabies, lyrics, and "autotales," as a series of six is subtitled. The section ranges from gentle to quite harsh in tone, unpredictably. "a marriage" describes a troubled couple who "work at night / torturer and victim," finding only brief respite in sleep. The first "autotale," "feefifofum," is slightly less dark, as the ogre who

troubles the child's sleep is trapped in a box, but the adult sleeper finds only an uneasy, unsettling poise: "i smile, tremble a little, / pull the blanket over my head."

Martens' short-lined poems often find a quiet, everyday lyricism. Something of a departure is his "autotale #5: portrait of the artist as a strung man," which plays off James Joyce's famous first novel, with its longer, prosy lines and oddly placed exclamation points. Its stirring conclusion celebrates the beloved "ordinary world," only a bit softened by the stagy last phrase:

> !and he blunders into morning, weary with night vision, he brews coffee, his bones ache like he's walked five hundred miles, and the coffee flows, and sunlight, until !glory, he's awake, in this beloved world, this ordinary world through which we wander, and he shuts his eyes, weeping with the beauty of it all)

Section two, "the great depression," refers not to the thirties but to the mental disorder that plagues so many (especially poets)—including, the poems strongly suggest, Martens himself. He is surely not the first poet to explore these difficult realms, but his description of "the realm of beast and / monster and demon" is memorable: "i shall call it / nothing, / come, take my hand, / walk with me, my / nameless, my / beloved tormentor." These poems are brave, subtle, and persistent in tracing the inner experience of depression. The conclusion of "chicken little" twists the familiar fable into a story that somehow finds a persuasive (if momentary) poise:

> anxious little chicken little
> spread his wings in flight
> and up he flew
> into the blue
> he saw the clouds
> bloom into light
> just where the sky was falling

The third and longest section, "talking hollywood," draws on the American Film Institute's "top 100 film quotes," as its 32 poems each play on, and sometimes with, a different movie. Arranged mostly chronologically, they offer a tour of American film from *The Jazz Singer* to *Jerry McGuire,* including many classics. On my first reading I found some of these poems a bit predictable—yes, the *Love Story* poem makes fun of the line "Love means never having to say you're sorry," and others run a bit close to plot

summary. But in the better poems Martens cannily applies the ekphrastic techniques often used to write about visual art, including imitation, parody, homage, and speculation.

The result is many ingenious and even revelatory passages. Who would expect a sonnet based on *Apocalypse Now*? This one begins, mildly enough, with "i love the smell of rain on dusty roads," but builds steadily to a memorable closing couplet and the film's most famous line: "i love the brutal siren's early warning / *i love the smell of napalm in the morning.*" [italics in original] Martens' take on *Shane,* a very different film also steeped in violence, imagines its heroic, isolated gunfighter's life after the famous ending that has him riding, literally, alone into the sunset: "you will be // nameless to saloon girls / on blind drunk nights. you will // cry when the sons you never knew / leave home. // nothing is forgiven." The *Star Wars* poem riffs memorably on "may the force be with you," including echoes of T. S. Eliot ("may you arrive where you / started, find me there, know / me for the first time"), and this even more enigmatic, resonant stanza:

> may the death star, may the glimmer
> of mournful empire, may the
> throb of warship, the noiseless
> explosion, the collapsing space, the
> lonely surrender, the dark shell,
> abandoned extinguished, adrift.

The final section, " . . . and a few short sequels . . .", returns to a more personal mode and, despite the offhand title, includes some of the best poems in the book. Some are comic, like the poem that promises an f-bomb but (spoiler alert!) never quite delivers, and "instant karma," in which the austere Buddha and the earthy but devout Menno have a memorable, eons-long dialogue, and finally share a big meal. The poem ends with both men sitting beneath their respective trees, one meditating, the other snoring—and a note, only slightly arch, assures us that the story "has been meticulously researched and is historically authentic." Others are full of compassion, as in this glimpse of a young man being taken away in handcuffs:

> *he looks directly at me,*
> *his face an ancient mask*
> *of grief, and vanishes*
> *into the world's great silence.* [italics in original]

It is probably fair to reveal here that, while Robert Martens and I have met only a few times, we are nearly the same age, his last name is the same as my wife's, and she also has roots in the villages of the Fraser Valley, where Martens still lives. The kinship I felt while reading these poems, though, seems to me to go deeper than such surface affinities. Many readers will find themselves at home in the warmth, humility, and generosity of *Hush*.

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