

Additional Praise for *The Magic Kingdom*

“There’s a certain kind of poetry, a certain kind of life, that’s like tracing your finger in a swift running brook. But this isn’t it.” The specter of Los Angeles rises from this book like a kirigami city. With a vexed and haunted fragility, Swensen writes furiously into this landscape—looking for a way in and a way out—“I want to burn eye-holes into the page,” he says, peering at us through slits. Without and within: fractured Psyche, snapshots of the dead underwater, snippets of barroom talk, valentines reduced to ash, the sun setting on our collective youth next to the broken down roller-coaster, the end of a movie reel flicking its celluloid tail in the dark. Both a fight song and an elegy, this book is sad & sexy, blunt & delicate—troubled into being “where Sunset splits like a serpent’s tongue.” I wanted to cradle this book in my arms but I was afraid it might bite.

—Karyna McGlynn, author of *I Have To Go Back To 1994 and Kill a Girl*

Some poetry teaches us how to live, some how to die. Russel Swensen’s poems accomplish both at the same time, which is remarkable for all sorts of reasons, least of which is that he sets himself smack dab in the middle of their drama, their heartache, their intense highs and lows. That we find a poet placing himself at the center of his work is not unusual—it’s very human—but rarely is the work so convincing, so compelling, that what we take to be autobiographical becomes myth. *The Magic Kingdom* is just that, a twenty-first century American mythology.

—Hayan Charara, author of *Something Sinister*

In Russel Swensen’s paralyzing collection *The Magic Kingdom*, the streets of Los Angeles become veins, bloodcells crowding the speaker as he tries to stay afloat amidst the crush of lost friends and lovers, “blonde hair/ braided into a glass of salt water.” The wild, unique beasts of LA are all here, a crystal deer stopping traffic, a Christ whose mouth twists open, a white song “drifting out like something from a fog machine.” Swensen’s surreal furies suture a pulsing landscape full of horror and tragedy, beauty and devastation. Blood runs the streets of Los Angeles in *The Magic Kingdom*, but what sicknesses and hitchhikers run amidst the cells? And what monstrous heart does Swensen feed with this blood?

—Glenn Shaheen, author of *Energy Corridor*

THE MAGIC KINGDOM

Russel Swensen



Black
Lawrence
Press

for Ashley, Braxton, & Raj

“Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town.”

—John Fante

It's like being made of apples & finding that you're forbidden.

—Ellyn Maybe

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ELEGY FOR MY TWENTIES

They were spent, despite my best efforts
in the city of Los Angeles
where the palm trees never seemed real to me
floating in front of the hair salons & nail parlors
in their wooden dresses that shone slick
as taffeta or

the trees were
beauticians talking amongst themselves

knowing something about loss
that escaped me then (as it escapes me now)
about how it can be dressed up

or concealed or made to shine with a hard
cake-like light

that both dazzles & sedates. Like youth itself,
once you have passed it by as I passed derelict cars
on the 405

old carapaces leaking old & silent families onto the shoulder
or into the rearview mirror

where they hardened & turned red with distance.
But this isn't about them.

& if I claimed to care about them,
perhaps that would be worse than simply not caring,
perhaps some things you can't make beautiful, perhaps one
solitary thing

which you do not own, but hold, helplessly in your hands, this
self you've invested so much in. This self you've surrounded
with swaying

trees & abandoned cars & sentient perfume (that clings to you
because it loves you) does it even sound

familiar? Do you remember instead do you prefer
to regret

those condemned houses you used
to wake in those decaying recliners with bad cocaine on tv
trays your little parade

of women you drove mad with worry the needle you found
in your car the black rubber staff that had been inside someone
& left behind—

is this better, is this worse. It has to matter,
but it doesn't.

There is this notion we have that
to write a good poem you have to be a good person
or seem like one—

which means you can't trust anyone. This is a problem,
a real one.

You've never had any other.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

I. THE FUNERAL PARTY

First the casket
draped in blue cloth— they've left
you swimming there beneath the fiberglass or

within it— a trapped whorl of light in polished
fabric.

I keep waiting

for you to surface & exhale—
the grave streaming

from you in cerulean
rivulets, sticking to your bony shoulders

like streams of kelp. And you will say, “this
was never death

this was the ultimate party trick” applause
ringing out.

~

“Who told you that I was dead?
How could I be dead?”

He holds a champagne flute in his
pale hands, grins—

the music crawls down the aisle and
over him—

weighs him down. He shrugs helplessly.
The music clings

to him with crusted red pincers. He
sinks back into the ground—

gives a surprised shout— “There’s
something down here.

I’m not alone.”

~

“The soul is muslin draped on form
—grief the handful

of crickets in your mouth. If Erik
found a bird

he would not hurt it. That is what this means.
That’s what he meant.”

The minister falls silent: walled up in dark
robes hands bunching out of his sleeves

like straw.

~

“She was crying. She asked me if I knew him.
I said I didn’t.

She was holding her program as though it
were injured. She was very careful. There were
a lot of girls there—

their faces were very serious & lit from within
—each carried a candle in her mouth.

I didn't know them.

Then I thought that it wasn't a funeral at all—
but a baptism—

the coffin a font that spilled from itself
darkened the carpet

turned it to earth

the hurtful sort
the darkened birth

soiled our nervous feet. I waited for you—
for a long time.”

II. RUSSEL

. n. *A reddish thing or animal.*

I've tried to picture your body
but can't. I've shot Tarot
readers in the fucking face woke
with only a scale of dragon
stuck between my nails I hear
people laugh & it's like they're
arguing with me their tongues
are an affront they're beggars
bowing before gold their applause
is a sickness the stop signs are in
league with them the zoning committee
does their dirty work.
I wake up & old friends
tell me to sleep it off like loss
is something to wake from
I wake & my dealer's in Hawaii
he's a palette he's a bitch I hit
Vegas see you paralyzed
at the slots moving only to sip
I wake sweating
I see you hanging in the hall
just the absence of light in a noose
the swaying flesh of you
like salsa meringue
like trying to learn the steps she was
that beautiful you met her as the oxygen
left your brain when she moved her hair
like a hawk folding its wings like a hawk
folding its wings I come to you but the pews
are full of nothing: red stretched
to glaze strangers faces spaces like

you did this to me like your
call will be taken
in the order

it was received

you will be put on academic
probation you will be found
wanting

you will pause in Yankee
Stadium & your heart

will not

III. BRAXTON

“It will be forever lost.” The voice rings out
& cracks

a teenage bell.
I thought you were in the Bible.

That’s what death means. That you are in
the desert. The desert was made out of really
bad hymns.

I tried to break you out of the Bible. It was
harder than jail.

It was a puzzle. I had to solve the Bible.
I tried.

~

“The mind as well. Now that you have dropped
the carrion (the water

thick as muscle) you must pull from it

the same poison you put in. Now your words
do not limn the darkness— they

are— hard as coral, deeply stained. They
fester like cormorants

in Alaskan oil.”

IV. ERIK

The cross on the wall shines like
a nectarine, curls like wet paper. Christ is stretched out
on it:

a scribble of lightning— when he speaks
I think it will be you. The mouth twists open
a white song

drifts out like something from a fog machine—
it says

V. WHISPER-DOLL

At the wake the china breaks & a horse
a red horse

walks through the bay window
without

making any sound an actual horse
with slap prints

of white on its flanks an actual
horse

breathing packed red earth an
horse

that no one notices even as it grazes
the cold lemon

ice I cannot eat a horse C
I cannot even

escape on one as it is not real; how will I go
on?