

## More Praise for *Santa Ana*

In these constantly shifting, restless poems, Russel Swensen creates an urban landscape mostly seen through the eyes of a brilliant, sometimes homeless, often nearly unhinged speaker. Populated by coyotes, threatened by wildfires, Swensen's Southern California is a place where everything seems to speak at once, where characters teeter on the verge of violence and the Santa Ana winds "run through the fields with a jacaranda of fire tucked behind their ear." These are electric, harrowing poems.

~ Kevin Prufer

Auden tell us that a poet should have not just an internal censor but a censorate, one made up of "a sensitive only child, a practical housewife, a logician, a monk, an irreverent buffoon and... a brutal, foul-mouthed drill sergeant who considers all poetry rubbish." In Russel Swensen's poetry, he lets these and a whole host of others have their say, and the sense you get is that after listening very carefully, and even taking their advice, he promptly gives them the middle finger. The result is a unique, uncanny sensibility, one that unites the ugliness of the world with the beautiful, the unsettling with the ordinary, the peculiar and strange with the familiar and inviting. You're going to laugh when you're not supposed to, and you're going to feel affinities to people whose lives you might otherwise pity or shrink away from. "You're clever and you have *élan*," Swensen writes, which is how you'll feel reading these poems. "But you can't shake the feeling," which is how you're going to feel long after.

~ Hayan Charara

**Russel Swensen**

**SANTA**

**ANA**

**Black Lawrence Press**

*for Liz*

Here's how it happens. You're at the trailhead in Elysian Park and a man on an ATV drives up and hops off. He tells you there are coyotes ahead and that they outnumber you seven to one. He says you have no chance. He says they outnumber your dog seven to one. And you're confused because you're in the middle of the park and unsure in which direction the coyotes have been seen. Have they slunk out behind you or are they waiting up ahead? You try to ask the man on the ATV but he just laughs and drives off. Now you're not sure if he was serious. But there are coyotes in these hills. You've seen them in the moonlight gliding forward as though on wheels. You want to say I've seen them too but the man is now a speck in the distance. This is Los Angeles and maybe he just meant there are coyotes and they do on average outnumber you and your tiny rat terrier and her strawberry spots. Or maybe he meant coyotes in a larger sense that there are predatory things in the hills filming spots for all terrain vehicles or throwing wrap parties in Beverly Hills (laughing softly and stopping when you walk into the room). Or maybe he just meant that you have no chance whatsoever that he saw something in your hesitant step that looked cowed and overwhelmed. Don't discount this possibility. Everything she said last night can be seen in the middle of you like a single mourner in the village square. Or it's just a joke and he wants to scare you. Why would coyotes be out in the daylight? Don't they evaporate in the sun, don't they run when they hear pebbles stirring in the ground? It doesn't help that you're hungover and sore and that everything is quivering as though touched with a faint breeze. Troubled into being. This isn't a good part of your decision making process. You think you could probably kill a coyote with your canteen. You should have brought a canteen. If they come at you how do you make sure your dog is safe while you vanquish them? You need someone else to hold her then you can beat the coyotes against flat rocks or throw them off the path watch them roll through the brush like bowling balls— you will laugh heartily. But then you'll look up and your dog will be missing. You know this with a terrible sense of certainty. You'll look up and call her name.

The sky spread with a knife.

All day, the ash settled slowly over the deer paths. The sky was red and rust and the pussy willows, if there were pussy willows, wept.

She had a tattoo of a star on one shoulder; she had scars and smelled like lilac. In the tub her bones moved like veins.

He was a drifter from Koreatown, loved that Karaoke, dessert at the H.M.S. Bounty: the pit of an apricot adrift in a saucer of honey.

Standing at the door as if made of brass; his hands came together like cymbals. Possibly at the Brass Monkey or underwater.

Where she saw him first. As he lost his job, if he had a job. He stopped, clasping his hands together as in prayer, the moment he saw her.

Or she shook the ash from her hair like dew and his hands remained outstretched, long after the dazzle of her scent.

She said yes; they walked through the lallating light. The question was the question, avoiding representation.

You're a tour guide. The room you've been subletting is being shown along with the rest of the house to a bevy of interested parties. There are girls from New Zealand and Sweden. There's a faint pattern of condensation on your cheeks. There's a Psychology professor from UCLA. Several twenty somethings with no readily identifiable source of income. Their phones have video capabilities. Someone at a great remove looks through the screen, someone ushers the phone through the room. It's strange to watch someone describe a place to a thing. You expect subtitles you were promised subtitles. But instead a rootless confusion, a broken comb. Why do these people have to be so selfish? You're not sure why exactly but every time someone fingers the fixtures you feel a little bit dirty. The gesture seems private and at this point they're still your fixtures. That's all. And if people keep playing with them water will come flooding out. It'll pour out your forehead and your fingertips and it will smell bitter and acrid. It will be like urine that is dark as tea. You don't want to cry dark urine tea. They're the ones who keep touching things. They're going to make you spill and this makes you anxious which makes you feel like water is definitely welling up and becoming inevitable. Nervousness distends your stomach. You're like a plague baby in aviation shades. Shifting your weight constantly from one foot to the other. Even though you know the effort is doomed. They want to make sure things work. You don't have a job. That's part of the problem right there. They have jobs and girlfriends and you have water. They want to check each and every faucet. You're looking too long at the drains. You're making people uncomfortable. You smile wanly. It makes people uncomfortable. You walk into the walk-in closet and hope it passes. You describe the closet but tell them they can't come in. You're shouting but remain calm. You're not shouting anything unreasonable. You describe dimension and utility. The shoe racks for instance. The feeling of imminence isn't entirely asexual. When it happens. Does it have to happen? You don't want to have to explain to people that you're not a spigot. They'll probably give you a long look. Your shoes are filling up with blood. There's no way of telling that it's blood. Someone has to take your shoes off and check.

If you've never had a home.

He puts her under water, she stays under water. Her veins move like eels, like black reels of forgotten film.

In the stills, she stands askew as if the floor were slanted or her skirt slipping, the ledge of her hips falling out of frame.

Clouds of flour harden on their skin; occasionally they open an oven, looking inside for a lost child.

First the edges brown to the air, then blackness at the center, then it's a flower, then you have to drop the picture.

You could say the camera wavers. You could say that.

He asks her to be like a bonsai, she knots her limbs in front of the sliding glass door, one foot in the spilled earth.

Toed in with animal grace or *alive to possibility*.

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 hermit crab, for instance.

Moves from one abandoned house to the next, wears each as raiment, one day you find him standing in your living room with only his eyes visible.

Or the plated glass where his eyes should be.

And he is screaming that you have forgotten him. He is screaming, this stranger in the abandoned home.

His forearm unravels on the ash-scuffed rug. How wet, how terrible, *but why*, the boy says, *would you ever bother cleaning up?*

Genuinely confused. The stranger is your friend for some time, several days, possibly weeks. Steals your favorite blouse.

You find a condom in the dirt just outside the house.

You stare into the sun until black dots begin to bubble up, as if from within it, until black dots, clustered like grapes, are all you see.

Each of them saying *listen, listen, please listen*. You have to listen to me.

Please.

You weren't always such a lousy tour guide. At first you described the home with genuine affection. You pointed out the fig trees and the blood oranges. You made some sort of apology for the mangos "I know they *look* impoverished, but..." You pointed out that the sunroom could easily be converted to a studio. That the driveway went from the front of the property all the way back to the landlord's house. "You could use it as a landing strip," you were telling people and they laughed uneasily because you were trying too hard. That's ok. You're getting fifty dollars for doing this and it's probably a good thing if your efforts are visible. You feel like "effort" is written on your forehead in shiny black magic marker. You felt like that, once. But something's changed. Now you describe the house as "endless despair, like a valley" the porch with its sofa where you used to smoke "freeing but kind of scary at the same time like when you really like this here cloud and then you see it on a horse but then the horse runs away." You're getting some looks at this point. But you look back and take off your glasses you want them to know you're serious. You stare very intently and ask pointed questions about commute. You weigh in on the local Thai and make sure to mention the proximity of the park. You discuss the relative merits of the two closest libraries. You are nothing if not assiduous and diligent. But something turns. There's just too many of them. It's seven to one every time and you don't really want to leave. These people hate you and that's why you have to leave.

Paul confronts you. He wants to know why you've been saying such terrible things. You tell him you can't understand him because of the wheelchair. You say that it's like going through a tunnel. He runs his hand over his bald head as though checking it for scratches. There are a few. He doesn't own any cats so you have to wonder. But you didn't mean to wonder out loud. Just lately things come out of you all sorts of things. You've lost your filter. There are all these hairy black flies inside of you and when they come out they sound cruel. They didn't use to come out. Now you're a pretty lousy window and you're still talking and Paul tells you to "cut the crap." He's not a bad guy even if he has things and you don't. There's a shawl in his lap though it's not unseasonably cold. You're really not sure why you're so attached to your newfound malice. Or why you briefly envision strangling Paul to death with the garden hose. You're afraid that he can see you imagining it and that he won't know that you're joking. You try to put your hand on his shoulder in a reassuring fashion but he doesn't find it reassuring at all. You offer to water the plants. The plants express no opinion as to whether they think this is a good idea or not. Paul asks you to stop crying. But you're not crying.