

Cedar Sigo. *Royals*. Wave Books, 2017. 96 pp. ISBN 9781940696539.
<https://www.wavepoetry.com/products/royals>.

The title of Cedar Sigo's recent poetry collection, *Royals*, couldn't be more apt for the book's regal interior, a celebration and investigation of the lives and creations of poets, artists, musicians, and others elevated as sovereign, as well as the author's own poetic lineage in created and creating verse. Sigo's royals are cataloged and displayed in living exhibition, guestbook ledger pages becoming the contextualized walls to hang or ink a portrait, where readers take a virtual tour of the galleries, parties, and poetry readings to witness the artists' picturesque productions, their colorful lives and conversations. The poems in *Royals* pay tribute to the poets and painters, musicians and lovers that have influenced the author and his creative process.

Sigo, in the tradition of the west coast branch of the New York School and Beat poets, whose lines and lives intertwine and illustrate their obsessions, evokes the glorified artists and adorns their admired lines of poetry and conversation with his own poetic fascinations, producing a collection that is, at once, both homage and exploration of his regal literary lineage and his own place among the royal. The reader is invited to the gala, the coronation of the celebrants, whether the landscape is a jazz club, an art museum, a library, a street corner, or even the poet's living room. We're on the guest list, welcomed to mingle among the courtiers and courtesans, equally VIP; encouraged to turn on, to flirt; urged to listen to the jazz and blues, to tune in to the dialogue, to browse the bookshelves and vinyl record albums, and to take home fragments of lines, "calling up receptors of individual visions," "trimmings," a "set of notes" from which to "press new meaning in between" and "retool" for the future (30).

Sigo's court comprises his early artistic influences – as "a Bolinas separatist poet" (26) moving between the Suquamish Indian Reservation and Seattle, Washington; Boulder, Colorado and Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics; New York City book stores; and San Francisco streets – illustrated in narrative exposition ("Dragging back my bags of books ... Allen, Jack, John Weiners / ... / I was mostly taught who to read ... Robert Duncan, Creeley, Joanne") (67); as well as homage ("Sensation" for Anselm Hollo, "On Strings of Blue" for Bill Berkson, "Our Lives" for Julian Talamantez Brolaski); and imitation ("Blue Moon" after Alfred Starr Hamilton, "Aquarelle" after Emile Nolde).

The book's dedication, "For Brian / – with whom all landscapes / become love poems," reflect the poet's love for these royal landscapes: the party, the poetry reading, the conversation. Sigo brings us there to mingle, to eavesdrop on the artists' interchange, to take part in the art and music, and to fall in love as the royals empty their pockets and suitcases to share all their possessions and obsessions.

In "The Real Contents of a Street Poet's Suitcase," Sigo catalogs among the short list poem: "Tiny dented copper spools," "An elephant gun," "Clean underwear," "Red Garland records (Red in Bluesville, Red Alone)" and ends with the underlined passages of Bob Kaufman's poetry in the Beat classic paperback *Golden Sardine* (59). Sigo quotes Kaufman in those final lines, lamenting that poet Guillaume Apollinaire's noble birth prevented his street credibility with the San Francisco poets:

Golden Sardine (with underlined lines and figures)
 "Apollinaire never hiked in papier-mâché woods"

“Apollinaire never slept in an icehouse” (59).

Sigo contrasts the lifestyles between the last two referenced poets: Kaufman, an African American surrealist poet who coined the term “beatnik,” and French aristocrat Apollinaire, who coined the term “cubism.” The “street poet” of the poem’s title has those passages underlined in his copy of Kaufman, positioning the lives of the poets, all poets, as equal in worth of reverence and immortality. Sigo invokes the lives of poets and artists, dead and living, referencing them throughout the poems in *Royals*, introducing us if we’re not yet familiar – and urging the reader to get to know this alluded to and elevated academy.

In the New York School style of Frank O’Hara, Sigo’s friends and influences stop by, enter in, and casually add a line or become a moment in the poems. “Bill Berkson / will read from / John Weiners / in my wooden / house across / the street (brown / with golden couch) / his sounding out / The Cut ... / ... / His voice held / the cleanest / copy one / could find,” writes Sigo in “On Strings of Blue” (11, 12).

In the Marcel Duchampish “Whims,” the speaker reimagines remaking objects into gifts for the royal beloveds: “I drew a French mustache / onto a John Cage postcard // ... I spun a haunted pendant / for the edges of Anne Waldman // I stamped and numbered an opium pipe / for Gregory Corso’s private room // I handwrote a Ouija board / for CAConrad and set it outside the door” (25), much as Joe Brainard reimagined the Ernie Bushmiller comic character *Nancy* in his fantasized alter-scenarios.

In “Thrones,” the New York School style homage takes the form of a Salish giveaway ceremony, Sigo says in a LitHub interview from January 2019. “My poem ‘*Thrones*’ was written after hearing a tape of Philip Lamantia read his ‘*Time Traveler’s Potlatch*.’ ... The form has you presenting gifts on bended knee in a way and it forms this sort of totem, a twitching altar with an almost invisible frame. For ‘*Thrones*,’ I was interested in honoring (communicating with) certain essential African American artists. ... While ‘*The Time Traveler’s Potlatch*’ is ultimately a flowing list of decadent gifts, I love that the form itself can also be seen as a gift to all poets.” (Sigo)

In addition to Bob Kaufman, Amiri Baraka, and Alice Coltrane, among other dead artists immortalized in “Thrones” include:

For Phillis Wheatley: A book of verse in cornerstones of a Moorish castle, purple and gold, depicting souls in various stages of release, the pitch, anger and arc of the poems an unrhymed mirror to the long Atlantic.

For Jayne Cortez: An intertribal grand entry of poets in cedar bark jackets, split skirts and whalebones pinning them closed, a voice in praise and suspension of the drum ...

For Stephen Jonas: Your favorite Eric Dolphy faded to a room of golden tasseled light, a couch of friends’ faces smeared in a gleaming silver crown (13).

In Sigo’s poems, “a couch of friends’ faces” is among the highest seat of honor, bringing the throne to the living room, the royalty to the shag carpet, the poetry reader to the art show, where surely Verlaine’s blues are playing, a current that reappears through the collection in color and

sound, at times referencing punk poet musician Tom Verlaine and at others, French surrealist poet Paul Verlaine. The Verlaines' blues are carried into *Royals* from Sigo's previous collection *Language Arts*, where we find the poet in the poem titled "Verlaine Blues" in the rain, "dressed in black, in mourning." "Go away from my door, I've got time alone and trouble for days / Sometimes I get the blues when it rains" (11).

Sigo's speaking poet/narrator finds his community in *Royals*, restaging "Apollinaire's last hot march into evening air" (*Royals*, 26). The "Essential Solitude" of the poet in *Language Arts* (9), where all "rooms are alien" (25), finds his rightful place among "The poets in glowing lab coats" in *Royals* (27), pressing "new meaning in between" "the trimmings" (30).

In Sigo's prose poem, "Watching William Castle Writing," "what makes it down onto the screen as letters, words, phrasing, seems after the fact" (62). When Sigo writes, "It is this desire to filter the language that we have captured" (62), it seems to speak of the author's process, filtering the "lines taken home" and "retooled" into a collection that stunningly reimagines and eternalizes them (5).

Cedar Sigo is "a stylist of lines" (52), building his "own circuitry / sounds // and flow" (23), turning his "spade to the inset language" (26) to thoroughly place the reader in the landscape of the poet and the poem. The immortal "chamber of maiden / thought is metered" and always "gives / way to the word / in this case," Sigo's – and in the case of *Royals*, Sigo's word is executed perfectly.

I read somewhere that if a poet falls in love with you, you can never die. Sigo's love poems to the poets and their landscapes in *Royals* elevate the artists enshrined toward immortality. As he writes in "Portrait in Black," "the dream house" becomes the heart "sketched," a "valley grove of bones," where "You can only capture the poets / and keep them lurking ..." (65).

Chip Livingston

Works Cited

- Mishler, Peter. "Cedar Sigo on Playfulness and Poetry." *Literary Hub*, Literary Hub, 29 Mar. 2019, www.lithub.com/cedar-sigo-on-playfulness-and-poetry/
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