

STEPHANIE HEIT

Wilder Walk, 2017
Oil on canvas, tk



COURTESY THE ARTIST

STEPHEN KESSLER

River Lovers

My river ran off,
after all our curved swirls and rippling swells
and sweet rapids of release, one rainy night she slipped
out of bed
and fled through town leaving a trail of heartaches in
her wake,
a flood of suitors who didn't rise to her level,
logs and ripped-out roots from way up the valley
smashing into our bridges and washing up on the
beaches,
evidence of our devastation,
egrets taking flight in one last flash
of the beauty we knew, the grace—
I had to call the corps of engineers and even they
couldn't contain her, the wetlands of our floodplain
spreading again
with every storm, it hurt so bad we couldn't hold the
pain
and so these birdlike cries until the quake or the wildfire
rakes through the ruins to take what little remains.
The climate has changed, it scarcely rains anymore,
the stream has thinned, like an elderly vegan
who needs a burger and a shake,
and yet in its desiccated state it displays its ducks
and delinquent gulls and random great blue heron
and tough and slender rushes in the shallows
sadly sipping last season's watery kisses.

Now I wait for storms to fill the reservoirs
and look for shreds of myself—
evenings across from the railroad trestle
when we smoked in the dark and looked upriver
at the lights reflected in the water and the shadowy
shapes
of the mountains, or the walk I took along the bike path
when I was leaving town for the last time
following my bliss to a bigger river on the other coast,
or pausing on the footbridge after lunch
on the way back to jury duty
to gaze at the crimeless calm of the trees
and smell the breeze blowing in from the Boardwalk
with corn dogs and cotton candy on its breath.
A little wilderness snakes through town
and who even notices but those who have next to
nothing
and who need a place to chill or do their illicit deals
or hide from a world that disdains them
to write their confessions no one will read
or drown their losses in a fog of intoxication
or make love under an indifferent sky.

Stephen Kessler is a poet, essayist and translator based in Santa Cruz. His most recent books include *Save Twilight: Selected Poems by Julio Cortázar* (translation), *Where Was I?* (prose poems), and *Forbidden Pleasures: New Selected Poems by Luis Cernuda* (winner of the 2016 PEN Center USA Literary Award for translation). His op-ed columns appear regularly in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. "River Lovers" is from an as yet unpublished manuscript, *Garage Elegies*.