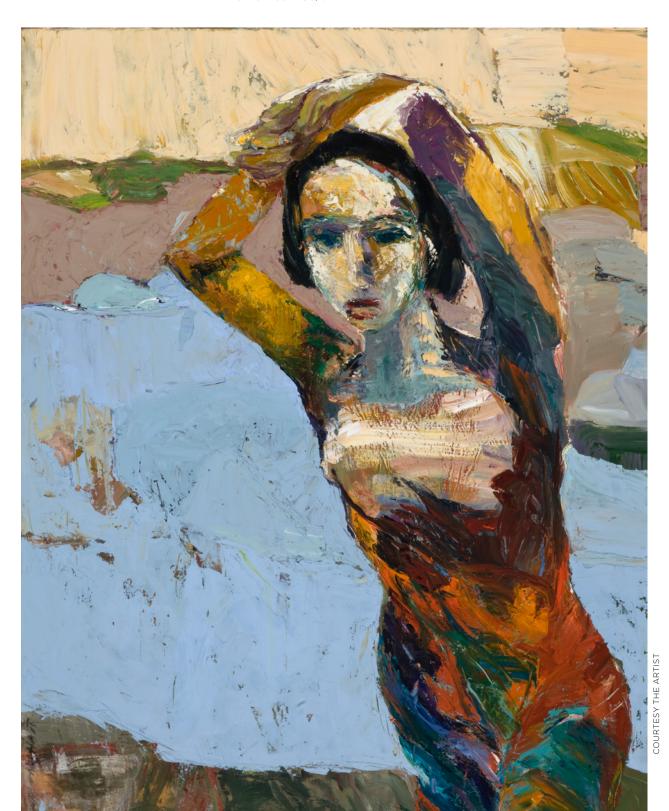
STEPHANIE HEIT

Wilder Walk, 2017 Oil on canvas, tk



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 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

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.