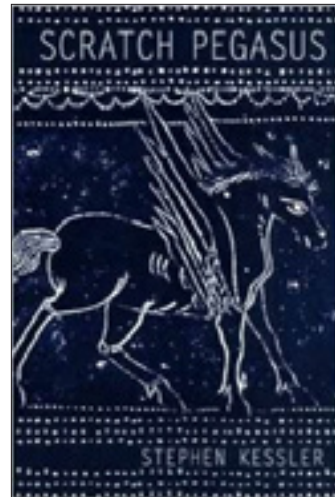


SCRATCH PEGASIS by Stephen Kessler
Swan Scythe Press, 2013

Review by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard



We live in a world that dismisses older people and is focused on the moment with iPhones, Ipods and more. But this wonderful book is all about time, honoring the years we accumulate with grace, and where memories rise up from his poems with all of their poignancy, love and humor. Stephen Kessler also finds wonder in our everyday lives and as we read through his book, we meet people with their charm and as well as with their flaws who become part of our own lives. To read this book is to awaken to all that surrounds us and to move beyond ourselves.

In the poem Thrift Shop the stories of the owners of what was left after their deaths come alive and envelope us.

*It came and it went
and here's the evidence,
endless shelves stretching deathlessly,
knitting cities with this network of used suitcases
and scratched furniture where families
ate and sat, travelers packed their stuff,
old women read books and lovers slept entangled.*

Another poem that ponders time is The Spanish Tile Table where he reflects on his mother and her lover's death, and on our impermanence, "Yet, I can touch the table/and feel the painterly light,/ its perfect warmth spilling/ into my lap this afternoon."

We live in a society that is fearful of death and aging as if we all didn't age and die. Yet Stephen Kessler writes about aging and what it feels like to lose friends, and become old. His poem Mal de Terre is a quip of the French word *mal de mer* or seasickness as he feels his world move beneath him and the passing years seem to drown him. However many of his poems herald the imponderable way that loss and eternity co-exist and how memories have their own lives and persist.

This amazing book shows us the many ways of considering time. In Skateboard Sonnet, he watches young people whiz by "as I can see them through my own quick past,/It was on days like this, under such a sky,/ my summer flowered without my knowing how/ fleeting it was....."

In the section of Kessler's book entitled Teachers, we learn that what we gain in our long years is understanding of our own life and that of so many others', an appreciation of experiences that have several seemingly incompatible identities. The poem William Wilson, about a man who helped in so many ways in his home, was a soldier in World War II, and whom he revered, also had a long criminal record. In many of the poems

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in this section, Kessler ponders the multiples of our being, that our paths are not straight as we would like but meander in different directions. One of my favorite poems in this section is Jesus Chavarria who lectures his students on the many difficulties of life, to young Americans who are oblivious of the harsh lives in other countries, concluding "so, there will be no talking in this class." Kessler has a wonderful sense of humor. I remember a similar lecture from a Spanish professor I had who talked to us as if we were ignorant of the problems in this world and indeed we were.

In the section called Wild Men the poem Mustafa reveals how a man who tried to befriend him was really a thief. A most touching poem, My Best Friend, celebrates all the miseries of his friend's bout with cancer, troubles at work, lack of money and how instead of wanting pity, he reached out and helped everyone he could. This poem once again breaks a silence in our conversations and in our social media. The ill are not invisible, are not weak, pitiful, but emotionally strong. Their suffering has brought them to new heights of understanding and an ability to reach out to all those in need.

The last section of the book Scratch Pegasus presents us with the holiness and eternity of art. Poem I Can't Decipher on a Stone brings us the calligraphy on that smooth stone quarried/ from an ancient mountain/.... to speak in sweet ambiguities/ swirls of darkness moving/ through fields of daylight caught/ in landscapes concise enough/ to fill your palm and be/held in your ignorant fingers./ For a man who has written almost 20 books of poetry, prose and amazing translations of Latin American as well as Spanish poets, Kessler is more than humble. He writes about Van Gogh, compares that painter's life with the dailiness around him including a baseball game, and concludes "That Vincent's tears will outlast the winner's fame." He also reflects on the transient next to what remains, writing about the artist Edward Hopper:/ the artist's truth transcending his success./ reminding us to honor the artists' exceptional visions.

This wonderful book is not only joy to read with its unique images that touch our lives, but is a lesson on how to live not in pursuit of fame but rather with the joy of relating to others on their own terms and seeing the world with clear eyes.