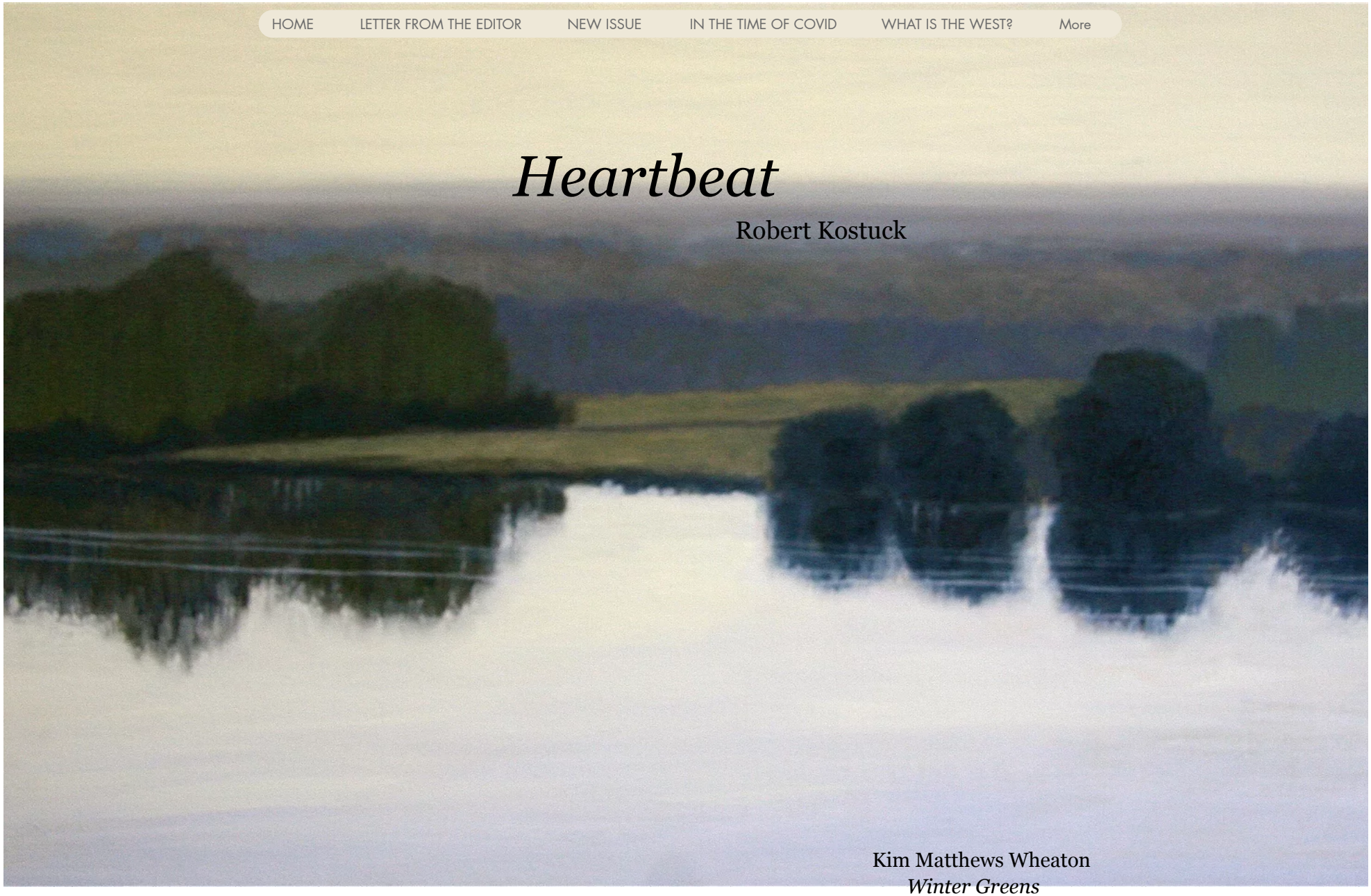

Heartbeat

Robert Kostuck

Kim Matthews Wheaton
Winter Greens

White blossoms flutter down as I shift a ladder and trim suckers from pear branches. Juan Carlos moves a trickling hose around clumps of herbs.

Fennel, mint, rosemary, oregano, basil, thyme, tarragon, myrtle—a misplaced foot releases odors, seasons the day. Visitors walk among us clutching paper sacks filled with cactus jelly, piñon nuts, jars of honey, pecans. “Cut it back too far and you’ll kill the tree,” says one.

“I trained to do this.” I rest my hand on my hip, just above the sheathed knife I always wear. “This co-op is a volunteer effort. We encourage community members to be more involved. What type of fruit trees do you cultivate?”

“It’s just common sense.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Angela,” Juan Carlos says, nodding at me, “has a degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from U of A. She’s a walking encyclopedia.”

“Just trying to help,” says the tourist. “If you smiled you’d feel better.”

“I’ll tell you what.” I pick up the hose, let water trickle over my hair, shake my head and throw off droplets in all directions. I offer the tourist my muddy hand. “Truce?” But he turns away, walks to the gift shop. “Jesus Christ,” I say to Juan Carlos. “I smile when I’m happy.”

“Angela, please.” He looks at me, hose in hand. “Even an atheist should respect other’s beliefs.”

“I want people to stop doubting my capabilities.”

“Me, I try to avoid conflict.”

“Difficult to do when someone’s in your face.”

“I thought you were going to spray him with the hose.”

“Waste of water.” I tilt a branch and inhale blossom perfume. “There are more important things.” I lean toward the silence of falling petals. Perhaps I’d smile more if I could hear more.

more.

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I wind baling wire around rocks culled from the Santa Cruz River, rope them to the older, established peach, apricot, and pomegranate trees until the branches curve down in smooth arcs. Rake pecan shell mulch in circles, chop down weeds around the deep holes in a cleared field where the new trees will go in.

I look around: Four dozen fat rootballs bound in burlap, branches bursting with flowers. Piles of cow manure and leafy mulch. A rented backhoe just inside the gate. Beehives stacked on pallets alongside the fence.

Juan Carlos and a woman with waist-length gray braids wandering down the slope from the market buildings. “Angela, this is my grandmother, Lucy. Lucy, Angela. She’s visiting —she lives over on the Rez near Sells.”

“Cobabi?” I say. “Chot Vaya?”

“South,” says Lucy. “Topawa. You know that land?”

“I’ve been through there a few times.”

She takes my hand. There’s a peculiar feeling in my arms and legs. It’s the bees, suddenly crawling over me: face, hands, arms, hair. They move gently, flow across the orchard trailing yellow and black rhymes. Some of them fly to her, dapple her gray hair and shawl in a pattern only they can understand. “Those bees really like you!”

“My sweat is pure and sweet,” I say, stepping back. “I started as a beekeeper. I move them around the fields and orchards; wherever they’re needed. This—” and I gesture at the gold dots on my face—“is because I respect them.”

“They protect you. I can feel it. You remind me of me when I was a young woman. It makes me happy when I see the knowledge pass from one person to another.”

“I try to change people’s minds. About the importance of knowing where their food comes from, even though the knowing has to happen without trying.”

"That's something we learn before we can walk." She nods in the direction of the Rez. "We grow pecans, apples, peaches, corn, beans, and squash. My grandson is like you—tied to the land. He's got us growing tomatoes and soybeans."

Juan Carlos scrapes a groove in the pecan shells with the heel of his boot. "I'm experimenting like we do here. I'd plant leafy greens under these trees. The partial shade makes all the difference."

I untangle a coil of used barb wire and hammer thick staples into fenceposts. The wood reeks of creosote. "This desert wasn't meant for giant farms and herds of cattle. I have to haul water from the river."

Lucy gathers up scraps of wire and wind-blown paper and plastic. "Our priest understands the land, but I wish we had someone like you who knew how to take care of the bees. That would help a lot."

"I had a run-in with a man today. Made me so angry—"

"You have gentle strength," she says. "Because you understand the language of the world. If people could sit still more, they would hear it."

As we leave the orchard my bees detach, singly or in groups. I swipe pollen from my cheek and bring my finger to my mouth. Wondering how to teach this thing we know. How to identify those prepared to listen. How to listen deeper myself.

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A small generator on the front of the trailer pumps water from the river, fills the five-hundred-gallon plastic tank. Less than a week until the equinox but it's already over eighty degrees. When the tank is full I shut off the generator, step up on the trailer, and look round in all directions.

The silence has its own echo—tangible but untouchable, like wind.

I drain cool river water around established trees, give the deep alluvial soil a good soak. My bees paint arabesques in the air, hum snatches of pop music drawn from my

adolescence. Patient pollination rhythm, the promise of fruition and harvest. Sweet

peaches are months away; I bring the memory of their taste to my tongue. A shrike drops down and snatches a grasshopper from the damp earth. A pair of bright dots: vermillion flycatchers, cautious and serene. Desert breeze across my face and arms, the choppy scent of blossoming creosote tangles with sunlight glinting from every splashed droplet of water.

Juan Carlos appears with two cans of beer. “We can start putting in the new trees tomorrow, right?”

“I’ll fill the tank again this afternoon so it’s ready,” I say.

“The driver from Sonora called; he’ll be here about three o’clock—we should have everything unloaded by five. Onions, sweet potatoes, squash, peppers, tomatoes—”

“Enough time to unload and sort everything.”

“My grandmother wants to help us put in the new trees tomorrow. She’ll probably just watch.”

“She brings something important wherever she goes. This is Lucy—” I hold out my open left hand—“and this is everyone else.” I circle my other hand around my cupped palm.

*

The next day is cloudless and unbound. Wind brings me moist air from the river. “I came early,” I say. “I don’t know how many volunteers are actually going to show up.”

“You’re limping?” says Juan Carlos.

“I banged my knee when I slipped off the trailer yesterday. I’m getting old.”

“When people care to do something because it’s good they can’t wait to get started.”

He points up the slope to the parking lot. Co-op volunteers park cars and trucks in a whirl of dust. Retirees with straw hats and teenagers in colorful t-shirts. Parents with children running and shouting. They swarm through the gate; talk and talk.

“You did these two by yourself?” says Juan Carlos. “How did you move them?”

I dump a wheelbarrow of manure and mulch into a hole; shimmy one of the root balls along the grass in a rolling, back and forth motion. Get the trunk parallel to the ground, cut the burlap from the root ball, and tip it into the hole. Shovel in dirt while water pours from the hose.

“Pretty straightforward.” I straighten my leg and hear a familiar click in my knee. “And since I really am feeling my age, everyone else can take over.”

The volunteers group and regroup, swarm from one side of the orchard to the other. It goes slowly because everyone wants to help. The rhythmic structure matches my pulse and intent, it touches my beliefs and goals. It is everything and it is enough.

Just then, Lucy approaches with a wicker basket. “I brought food just for you.” The basket is filled with fry bread, corn tortillas, and plastic containers of beans, onions, peppers, and cheese. “It’s very quiet. Like they know.”

“I sent the bees to the desert. Saguaro, ocotillo—everything is in bloom. It changes the flavor of the honey.”

“This is great.” Juan Carlos digs in his grandmother’s basket and taps on his cell phone. “Real community effort.”

“Don’t take my picture,” I say, “I’m filthy.”

“But it’s honest dirt. These are going straight to the website.”

Lucy and I scoot closer together. Can the camera see the sparks of knowledge and intention passing between us?

By noon we’re three-quarters finished—thirty-five trees in the ground and plenty of energy still spinning through the air. The teenagers bring the chairs and tables down from the market; set them up in sycamore and cottonwood shade along the south fence. People unload a station wagon full of ice coolers, hot aluminum pots, plates, cups, and silverware. We gather in small groups, eat and gossip, break apart, reform. I walk over muddied and trampled grass, inhale a visual cacophony of color, an auditory palette of hums, buzzes, clicks, and whirrs.

“It’s beautiful. Flowers everywhere, even on the new trees.” I unzip a backpack, hand Lucy a cloth sack of peach pits. “Keep them dry and out of the sun. It’s a start.”

“Father Vásquez says a mission should be self-sustaining,” she says. “He grows herbs in pots and tends about twenty lemon trees. Getting enough water is a problem, and if a goat tears down a fence, good-bye plants. They eat everything in sight. He wants to have a garden in the desert. I spoke to him on the telephone yesterday. I told him what you do, and who you are. That you are a good person; that you want to help.”

I turn in a circle—the view never gets stale. Everything’s solidly rooted for generations to come. The swarm trickles in from the desert, a subdued hum. I bow my head, scuff at green grass. A bee lands on the tip of my boot, yellow and black, bright as a star.

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Whitewashed St. Catherine’s retains night’s coolness in the morning light. I park near a jumble of palo verde trees and red-tipped ocotillos.

A man walks up to me, his hands outstretched. “I was born in Mexico,” says Father Vásquez. “Topawa reminds me of summers I spent with my uncle’s family in the countryside of Guanajuanto. When I was a child, Jerécuaro was everything the city wasn’t, like stepping back in time. Now if only I was fluent in Tohono O’Odham! I practice every day.”

“He does,” says Lucy. “Almost a member of the tribe.”

“You have goats here.” I kick the gnawed base of a prickly pear and hear a voice telling me to smile.

“Only two,” he says, “but when they get loose they eat everything and anything. The chickens, too—they scratch at the base of the trees and injure the roots.”

Struggling fruit trees are clustered in the church courtyard. The fence is woven baling wire and ocotillo branches, there’s a single sagging gate. A ragged row of cactus along the outer side. Tiny songbirds glean encircling mesquite trees. Vultures loop in a relentless sky.

“I’ll see who’s willing to help,” says Lucy.

After she leaves us, I check each tree. They’re sad and wanting.

“It’s still cool enough to prune. I have tools in the truck.”

“I trust your judgment,” he says. “Shall I help, or will I be in the way?”

“You could watch and learn.” I cut suckers and dead branches from the first three, show him how to trim the fourth, together we trim the remainder. “Now about this fence.”

He leads me to a brushwood ramada in the corner, points out a bundle of metal fence posts. Juan Carlos arrives with two other men. Between us we’ve enough shovels, one good pickax, and a sledgehammer. We methodically mend and strengthen the fence.

I scratch out lines with the pickax and we shovel out trenches between rows of future vegetables.

“Tomatoes?” says Father Vásquez.

“It will be too hot,” I say. “The fruit won’t ripen correctly. I brought seeds for pinto beans, pumpkins, squash, and peppers, which will go here, out of the afternoon sun.”

“When would we plant?”

“How much water do you have?”

Their water tank is lashed to a trailer, parked in the only all-day shady spot on the side of the church. I hitch it to my truck, back it through the garden gate.

Composted manure and bone meal, water carried in buckets. Seeds. Noonday sun.

Lucy sets her wicker basket in the shade. One of the men brings me a metal folding chair but I sit on the ground with everyone else. Father Vásquez says a prayer. I keep my eyes open and bow my head. Lucy smiles.

After lunch the men return to their homes, and we step up to the building. Inside is dark and surprisingly cool. They kneel and pray. Father Vásquez excuses himself, retreats

deeper into the twilight. “Smells good in here,” I say.

“Mesquite and sage.” Lucy lights a candle, waits for me to do the same. “Some folks complained about the incense smell. What’s important is the offering rises to Heaven.”

“Like prayers.”

“That’s right.”

*

Sunday. I finish dressing and follow her to the church. She guides me to one of the benches near the front. The religious service is interesting. At the end, Father Vásquez shifts slightly and everyone relaxes. He introduces me, explains why I’m in Topawa. Lucy squeezes my hand. I smile, perfectly relaxed on the backless wooden bench.

Afterwards people line the fence behind the church, stare doubtfully at rows of mud.

“I would consider it a personal favor if you would tell everyone exactly what we’re doing and what needs to be done,” says Father Vásquez. “I’ve found that our successes here in the desert are compounded when everyone’s on the same page.”

As I talk, the heat rises. I feel my pulse in my hands and temples. It rocks me along. The immense sky, the hot breeze, the bruised shadows of thirsty trees. I move close to the fence and the wild bees rise from buttery yellow prickly pear flowers, alight on my hair, face, arms and hands. A shock runs through the group.

“Angela’s a woman of the desert,” says Lucy. “Like wind playing with the corn, she brings movement.”

I cross the damp ground and the bees lift from me and drift into a stray breeze. Their whispered secrets complete me.

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Two weeks later at the co-op, the trees sag with ripening fruit. I shift a ladder, sweep dust and paper scraps. Juan Carlos snips herbs, rinses them in water, arranges them in a plastic tray. Later we will bundle them—everything at one dollar a bunch.

A pre-teen girl separates from her family, watches me closely. “Why do you have a knife?” she says.

“Mostly habit. Trimming produce, cutting twine on bales of hay—when I have time I carve things.”

“What kind of tree is that?”

“That’s an olive. That, peach. Apple, pear, different apple, lemon, quince.”

“There are bees here. I don’t want to get stung.”

I cup my hands and scoop water from a bucket. A rosemary leaf sticks to my finger. The bees zero in, alight in a circle around the reflected sky.

“They’re not stinging you! That is so cool.” Mesmerized, she touches my arm. “I felt a shock. Did you feel that?”

Others gather. They focus cell phones, snap photographs without asking. The girl dips into the bucket, holds her arm steady. They come to her: a golden pulse in a hand that holds the world. My own ears tune in. How to teach this thing we know, how to identify those prepared to listen.

Robert Kostuck is an M.Ed. graduate from Northern Arizona University. Recently published fiction, essays, and reviews appear in many print journals and anthologies.He is currently working on novels, short stories, and essays; his short story and essay collections seek a publisher.