

# Willow, Split Willow · Katharine Haake

## 1: MATERIALS.

*Willow, split willow, redbud, mud-dyed bracken fern root.*

In the heat of such a day there is nothing for it but to follow the man.

*What man?* The Salvadoran.

*Who follows?* Beth.

*Who is Beth?* Beth is a graduate student gone bad.

*Bad, who says?* I say. *Who are you?*

In the heat of such a day: this is California, southern California; it is a Santa Ana, still, in San Diego, without the mountains, the canyons to whip the winds to such a frenzy, still, with nothing moving, shadows as if etched where they fall: it is so hot.

I am she who is writing these words. That is all the answer you will get; the rest is volumes—volumes, or silence. I am, after all, the one with a history; Beth is, first of all, the sound of her name. Ah Beth, what will happen is this.

Beth will follow the man up into the hills above San Diego to the camp where he lives with other Salvadorans who descend every morning to the city seeking work, money, food, missing relatives, the answers to prayers, the fulfillment of dreams, ways home. How vividly I have imagined this! She will follow first on foot, then when he joins the others in the back of an old high-bed pick-up, by car, then once again on foot as they leave the cartographer's world and enter instead one more ancient, unchanged since the Indians lived there, gathering berries, weaving soaked reeds. Beth is from Virginia, ill-at-ease off beaten tracks, unfamiliar with the dangers of heat stroke and, less commonly, scorpions, rattlesnakes, flash floods. Thus, her curiosity will turn, as she follows deeper into the desert, to uneasiness, but there will be no turning back.

(Should she turn back? Why does she follow in the first place? Were there ever any Indians there?)

The trail, what there is of one, padded down only by the passing of these illegal feet, will wind through grass and chapparal, then drop steeply, dis-

appearing in a jagged ravine. The men will scale the ravine and Beth will clamber cumbersomely after them to lie hidden at the top and spy on their camp until a woman's cry draws her down into it. The woman is a child in labor; the birth is a breach.

Whatever else there will be of this story, I'm not revealing yet, probably do not yet even know, though you, I suspect, would prefer that I not say so. You would prefer that I take charge, take control, order these things according to the workings of your imagination and curiosity, give in to the pull of enigma, the pleasure of lure, have sex at your whim and as you desire.

Ah you, who are you?

Who indeed are you to tell me what to do?

Though again I must acknowledge that though I cannot help but experience your expectation—your carnal touch—as constraint, it's no responsibility of yours. We inherit both the narrative and world we inhabit. Things are fundamentally that simple, and that absolute. No, it's no fault of yours if I want out. Beth does too, that's why there is such a bond between us.

Beth. Beth. Beth. Beth.

If you knew her, you would say of her that she had all the luck; thus, you never could tell the depth of her despair.

Beth. The sound of her name. Gone bad graduate student. Virginia.

Beth got all the honors, all through grade school, high school, college. She wrote a senior thesis that got published, on something like Melville and masks. She was so damned smart the only boys who asked her out, though of course she didn't know it, were crazy, mostly manic-depressive, as a consequence of which she has little scars all over her pale smooth skin, self-inflicted for the most part because she had no way of knowing what to do with all that grief. All that grief.

Surely there were things she could have done to assuage it, different things done differently: stayed put in Virginia, for example, gone to UVA. Or perhaps she might have married out of high school, given in to babies, the rigorous structure of diapers and feedings and naps. To exchange such a structure for grief, that might have been even, that might have been fair. But babies would have ruined Beth's high sense of adventure, adding

pounds to her slim hips and making her matronly before her time.

Besides, you know how it was back then, back before the war was over, back when people still wandered from one side of the country to the other, back and forth and back and forth, seekers of a different sort than we can quite imagine now. Beth never wandered like that, but plenty of the men who broke her heart did, so by the time she ended up in San Diego, a.b.d. at last, she was ready to cast off that particular spell and settle down to do serious work. But Beth never counted on the Salvadorans; Beth never knew about the Santa Anas.

The Salvadoran.

Ah, the Salvadoran.

There is also a man Beth is seeing now: Ian.

Ian has his advantages. He's steady, a rock. He makes a mean pasta and can match his own socks. Ian met Beth in the Rare Book Room. Ian's trained in modernism but is doing time in composition. This is ok with Ian, it pays the bills, but from time to time he thinks of looking up the guys he started out with that never made it through comprehensive exams, the ones who, when they left, he gave parties for and thought of with both pity and regret, most of them lawyers by now, living high off the hog, though he knows for sure about one brakeman in Montana whose kids, he has recently heard, are sprouting up, already approaching the drug years. But if Ian looked them up, what could Ian say to them?

Ian, believe me, would be speechless. What does he even say to Beth when Beth implores him: "They wander up and down the street. Where do they come from? Where do they go?"

Ian says, "Beth, who?"

Beth says, "The illegals, Ian. Salvadorans."

"They're not all Salvadorans," Ian says. "Why do you assume they're Salvadoran?"

"The war is closer then you think." Beth is trembling. "Look at all these displaced people."

"Snap out of it, Beth," is what Ian says.

And Beth says, "Butt out. Just butt the fuck out."

This is not how it has always been between them, nor how it will always be either. It is just something that happens, a passing stage, a difficult time.

Back when Ian met Beth in the Rare Book Room, she was focused, ambitious; she was poring over rare books and taking notes on a laptop computer; she was half way through her dissertation. But Beth had, by sheer chance, rented a guest cottage behind an old La Jolla mansion, and it came, she discovered, not just with a view of the ocean but also of the world.

Maybe this is true of any place, but in California the homeless are part of your daily life. You see them with their shopping carts, their swollen ankles, their wild eyes. Your heart breaks for them even as you turn away, shielding the eyes of your children. At night you nourish your guilt with plans for escape. You believe that maybe in the country you will not be so frequently reminded of your vast complicity with the way things are.

The Salvadorans Beth speaks of do not look like this. They are tidy, proud. They carry a trowel in their pockets. In the wealthiest neighborhoods they look humbly for work, and they are not unskilled. But Beth is right. They appear on foot; they disappear on foot. They live, she has heard, in encampments in the hills.

## 2: STRUCTURE.

*Coiled bowl with three stick foundation. Split willow, dyed bracken fern root and split redbud stitching elements in interlocking split stitch. Fag and moving end trimmed on inside. Coiled to the left.*

You want to know why Beth's obsession grows. You want to know why now, after so many years, the pieces start falling apart and, as if somehow to compensate, she views the Salvadoran with such curiosity, such passion: why now she should follow: follow, follow.

In the first place, what you must know already is that she does not follow to find out where he's going. She would, you must know already, prefer never to arrive. If she knew where he was headed, she might never, I believe, have started out.

In the second, what you might not yet have guessed is that for Beth, as also, perhaps, for me, the difficulties started in her dreams. Dark-eyed, intense, the Latino wanderers returned to her, circling her bed, whispering in their other language all about their own war, their pasts, their families, sorrowful stories replete with dislocation and loss. When Beth would wake up, their shadows would hover on the walls as if etched there forever

by the Santa Anas. Nothing would move. *Where do you come from?* Beth would call out. *How do you live?* Tongues flapping, they would yammer indecipherable answers, guttural sputterings and sweet sibilances whirring and whirring around Beth's head.

In the morning there again they would be, walking up the camellia-laden walk to the front door of the mansion behind which Beth lived and she would want to offer them work, for they would take nothing without having worked, but the grounds of Beth's guest cottage belonged to the mansion and she herself owned only one single sickly spider fern hanging above her front door. There was never any work for them, but still they came and came, every day new ones or the same ones, every day the voices from her dreams reunited with their bodies, every day the longing to spread her arms and tell them *mow, trim, plant, water*, every day the fascination with the incongruities of fate.

Certainly, Beth should have stayed put in Virginia. Her will was never any match for this. By the time the Santa Anas came in earnest, she was slacking off in class, with periodic lapses of attention, occasionally sleeping right through. If you would have asked her, she would have had to acknowledge that already those nighttime languages made better sense to her than what she heard in her seminar reports. Only no one ever asked her, not even, or especially not, Ian.

"Trust me," Ian would have said if he had said anything. "It's a better life than where they come from." He would have said, "I know it's scary out there, but you've got to make your compromises." He would have stroked Beth's hair, nibbled at her ear, groped for the inside of her thigh. "Look at me."

But, as I say, Ian says nothing. Beth has asked him to butt out, and the way Ian looks at things, with a high-strung woman like Beth, you have got to take precautions, take your time. Poor, poor Ian. Ian's turning gray, getting plump. Ian's freshman students are starting to call him Professor. Ian can't help but think about settling down, about that brakeman in Montana with his pre-pubescent children. What Ian really wants, I suspect, is what most men really want: to have some woman match their socks for a change, to come home, when they are tired, to a clean house and wife, mashed potatoes and meat loaf, bread pudding, obedient kids. Only Ian also loves Beth in his own way, and if he knew about her plans to follow those men up into the hills where she believes she may uncover the true

source of her dreams, he'd never have allowed it, he'd have intervened at once to protect her from whatever violence might follow.

Is Beth prepared for violence?

Am I?

In the heat of such a day, the one Beth will follow is slight, darker than so many of the others, and his hands move quickly over plants, as if compelled to touch, to caress, to hold them. Never still, the man's fingers pluck bougainvillea leaves and crush them at house after house. The women who open the doors, Salvadoran themselves, shake their heads as instructed, no. *No trabajo*. Beth, from the front door of her cottage, watches him approach. It is so hot, so unnaturally still. Around her, the world lies as if stunned. It is as if the earth itself has spun somehow off its course, is spinning even now closer and closer to the sun. Beth alone, and the man, and the doors opening and closing, are the only moving objects in this scorched world where even insects settle into the crooks and crevices of sidewalks, bark, leaves, and the shadows of the natural world are as if engraved upon the earth.

Beth watches.

The man clutches camellias.

*Now*, Beth thinks. *Now*.

The door of the mansion opens, shuts. The man turns around, retreats. Beth follows.

Only what Beth doesn't count on, has yet, I sometimes think, even to figure out, is that here, in southern California, at this far unstable edge of the continent, we live at the end of the road, not to mention the world. Let me give you an example from my own daily life, not that unlike hers though with its own idiosyncrasies, problems. My family has lived in California for several generations now. One grandfather was born onto an apple farm in Watsonville, a grandmother into a mining camp. I myself grew up in Redding, which, if you have never been there, is situated at the far end of the Sacramento Valley, just east of Mt. Lassen, just south of Mt. Shasta, and some one hundred fifty miles from the ocean, on the dry side of the mild coast range. This is not the same as Beth, whose proximity to Washington, D.C., the whole time she was growing up allowed her a clear sense of history and culture. She spent her childhood at the Smithsonian; I had

nowhere to go but the buckbrush-covered hills above the Sacramento River just beyond where my parents still live.

At my elementary school there was a packed-dirt playground that during the fall and late spring would be covered with a light red dust, fine as talc. The boundaries of this playground were marked by a circle of boulders, beyond which valley oak, manzanita, digger pine converged at the edge of the foothills. As a child and well into adulthood, even now, I suppose, if I am being honest, I always felt most comfortable in solitude and also in nature. This, I am told now, is naive. Nature, they tell us, is over, and if all during *my* growing up, I wandered in circles on the inside of those boulders — what, was I dreaming? — immersed in and somehow completed by that fine dust, those rocks and trees, the hills rising up to near mountains, the shifting expanse of sky — now cloudy, now high and blue, now low, gray, windy, exciting — that, perhaps, is my misfortune, by which I mean my sadness at this loss, as well as, I have always believed, my fate.

Now that, fate being what it is, I live in LA, my daily commute takes me through mountains hauntingly familiar, right over Sepulveda Pass where every year they shave away more ground without yet having been quite able to erase the vestiges of California landscape — the grasses, the scoop and thrust of hill, the dogged buckbrush, that overwhelming sky. What I'm trying to say is that it's the eeriest feeling, like driving through a ghost, some lingering shadow of the past, tenacious and dear. And it is in this that I believe Beth and I are not altogether different, for the farther west she got the less inclined she was to the pure pursuit of scholarship, as if having come so far she was also moving somehow closer to the center of things, burrowing, as it were, into a past that, though it was not hers, nonetheless compelled her, like a lure, almost, a promise of completion that continued to elude her precisely because she could not guess its source.

Look, what I'm talking about in other respects is layering: Beth, me, this heartwrenching geography we visit. I don't know about Beth, but one of the reasons this world I'm describing is so fundamentally compelling to me is that it reflects exactly the way we ourselves are a layering of narratives, some more elusive than others, muted, disturbing, enigmatic. I drive through California every day like an archaeologist, stripping away at the ruin we have made of things, restoring the wind to the unmediated touch of earth. Often I hear my grandfather's voice, whispering in my ear *and over here we will build*. I drive weeping. I think of Beth in La Jolla, where it is

just as bad, the condominiums spreading like rot over the delicate desert terrain, or where she lives, the unnatural cultivation of lush exotic gardens, teeming, overripe, a lie.

### 3: CONDITION.

*Insect damage. Tears. Dramatic increase in susceptibility to abrasion due to fungal attack of organic oil resins.*

In the heat of such a day, in the back of the pick-up, there are others like him, like the Salvadoran, slight men, dark men who, gripped by the fever of the same Santa Ana that sends Beth reeling out to follow, follow, follow, do not speak, the men, their stories spent already in someone else's dreams. There are torn brown bags stuffed with stolen cabbages, coconuts, rotting produce from supermarket dumpsters. They are heading north now, through a countryside of stuccoed condominiums. This is another dream, Beth thinks, surreal, these planned communities with open space, amenities; but how did it happen in the history of mankind that these plain men should cross whatever borders to end here, in that high-bed primer-spotted pick-up, Beth tootling along behind in her old blue Honda.

"Wanderers," she tells Ian one night, "wandering in a dream dreamt by another."

"Keep drinking," Ian says. "I like you metaphorical."

"You think I mean the California dream."

"No clichés, Beth, please. I get enough of those in class."

"But I don't. What I mean is," Beth says. Her hands are lying open on her lap. "What I mean." Beth is failing at language. "Ian," Beth says. "Oh, Ian."

But when the pick-up leaves the freeway, passes through the condominiums, veers off on a rutted dirt road pre-cut for the next development, then veers again onto an off-road-vehicle trail, and then finally, as if blindly, into grass, Beth has no further need of language.

One by one the men clamber out of the pick-up. They form a single file. They walk off through the grass, which parts briefly around their thighs, their buttocks, and then closes in again around where they have been.

Beth, who abandoned her car on the rutted dirt road, watches their dark, bobbing heads from a distance. There is something so deliberate

about them, so determined, with a scrambling kind of grace, Beth fails even to consider the extent to which she may already have put herself in danger. Heat stroke, dehydration, scorpions, snakes. Rattlesnakes, coiled to the left. Hiss. Coiled left. Beth raises one hand to shade her eyes against the late afternoon glare of the sun. She thinks that in this light there is a golden hue to everything, a blush with a tinge of excitement and shame. She knows, too, that within an hour, maybe slightly more, all that will fade, taking with it this heat and her sense of direction. Even so, Beth does not hesitate to begin this last leg of her journey, stepping off into the grass with something like alacrity, almost agile herself, almost sure-footed, almost as if dreaming again. But this is the natural landscape, replete with burrs and small sharp stones and this silence still as death that descends around her.

Now she must rely on an instinct so primal she could never have anticipated it, for the men ahead of her, purposeful and quick, disappear often beneath the crests of small hills, then reappear again as if at random somewhere else on the rugged terrain. Soon Beth is dizzy from heat, a sudden fierce thirst, and a sense of expectation so keen she remains oblivious of danger. Almost, she would call out to him, the Salvadoran, cry *wait, wait*. Almost, she imagines that when they have scaled this last ravine or that steep cliff, she will stumble into his embrace, he will stroke her hair, they will in this way assuage each other's grief. But Beth is working hard now even to keep up and, sweat-soaked, choking for breath, struggles on without really thinking anything at all, certainly not what may come next.

What else we share, Beth and I, is a certain iconography, the clutter, for example, of our desks, which contain the usual photographs and letters, manuscripts-in-progress, bills, as well as the rather more idiosyncratic assortment of native cottons and this graceful old split willow Indian basket. We collect the fabrics, Beth and I, and when we write we fondle them, marveling at the similarities in dye, weave, design. I drape my computer with a brilliant Hmong square; Beth carries coins in a small Nigerian pocket. All around us we scatter these scraps — Thai, Guatemalan, a Mexican embroidery. We crave the bright colors and their oblique connection to a life both distant and essential.

As for the Indian basket, it was a gift from my grandfather, a physician, to whom it was a gift from a Washoe Indian in northern California whose

child my grandfather had treated, to whom it was, in turn, a gift from someone else—an ancestor, the last remaining member of some other family, a tribal figure in recognition or tribute—to whom, in the beginning, it also was a gift, probably to celebrate a wedding or perhaps the birth of a child. We know this because of the nature of the basket, its intricate patterns both too subtle and complex for the mundane everyday world, its graceful form too apparently useless. There are also, in my family, silver and cloisonné opium pipes my grandfather accepted as payment from dying Chinese miners. These, however, I do not keep on my desk; nor do I give them to Beth, as I have given her the basket, though what we must do with it is another question, how we must handle it, for it is a heritage not without problems.

Thus, what you too must imagine is the natural world in perspective. If you draw back far enough Beth is tiny, tiny, not even recognizable as human among the rocks and grass and bushes; close, it is the steep slant of earth stretching up before her, how it looms, that imposes, and the buzzing of insects, attracted to her sweat, in her ear. In this moment, before she quite realizes how lost she may be and still at odds with even her own dreams, Beth is temporarily vindicated, for in this moment she has given wholly in to her longing and nothing bad has happened yet.

“You see, Ian,” she might say in another context, “I tried to tell you but you wouldn’t listen.”

“Tell me what?” Ian wouldn’t get it.

“Wanderers, Ian,” Beth would insist. “Oh wandering wanderers.”

“Now, now,” Ian would soothe her, and in her frenzy to be understood, Beth would allow herself to be soothed, might even go out for burgers and beer, drive along the coast to watch the sunset, for it was, after all, only a single moment among many, the one just before she swipes her damp hair from her forehead, and stopping briefly to rest, squats close down to the earth from which the first cry all at once rises up, a moan that swells with the full force of centuries to a scream Beth must recognize and own.

*Rodent damage also at rim which includes numerous teeth marks.*

#### 4: TREATMENT.

*Handle with care.*

You know from how I started what will happen. You know already that the cry is from a woman in labor, that the outcome of the labor is in question. You know too, from what you know of Beth, that such a sound in such a place will confirm what she has long suspected, and that she will proceed without caution, that she will scramble forward, then gracelessly descend into the make-shift camp of shabby tents and lean-tos to stand among the Salvadorans and, in a language both foreign and oppressed, demand to see the suffering woman.

*"Donde?"* she will say. *"Donde está la señorita?"*

But the men will turn away, shaking, perhaps, their heads, returning to whatever it was they might have been doing when Beth intruded, startling them with her fury and presence. Some are maybe carving small pieces of wood, toys for children somewhere, mementoes; others are squatting over coals, stewing the vegetables, gnawing at dry chunks of bread. Helpless, Beth will wait there at the exact center of the encampment, trembling a little and beginning now to be afraid for it is clear now even to Beth that the dream has somehow reversed itself and that she has already wandered so far beyond her ken fate alone must intervene to save her. But the contractions are coming more quickly now, and when the cry comes again, Beth, instead, must act.

*"Where?"* she demands. *"What? What are you doing to her?"*

The Salvadoran, the slight one, the one she has followed, steps forward. They are the same height, and now, looking into each other's eyes, they recognize, each of them, something in the other, maybe desire, maybe shame, maybe nothing more than complicity in their current dilemma. Beth thinks maybe he will strike her; she is aware that the rest of the men have turned their attention back on her and the man who has brought her to this moment. She feels both intensely vulnerable and so full, finally again, of her own purpose that even in the case of real violence she will do what now she thinks she has been called to do: respond to this cry, assuage it.

If I were behaving, being a good girl, I would do that now: take you to the tent where the child lies alone on her back on a ragged, filthy blanket with her legs spread wide and the baby caught somewhere between them, its tiny

buttocks visible through her stretched vagina. I would acknowledge the requisites and ancient proven privilege of narrative, the pure linear thrust, the sweet gratification of form. I would do all this and more, but I am not, in this respect, and never have been a good girl, though how willingly I would have pleased had I known how. My own mother has recently confessed that whenever she would happen to see me wandering the periphery of that grade school playground I described, she would marvel, perplexed, at how she had borne such, in her words, “a peculiar child,” me, compelled by that landscape. Now, lost with Beth in a different landscape I want nothing more than to turn up my hands to that broad sky and start searching through tents myself, for like you, like Beth, I am stunned by what has happened and feel in this instant completely powerless to decide between what is merely possible, what unequivocally inevitable.

As for form, what is form and hwo has the right to saw what is a legitimate form?

This is what will happen.

The baby will live or the baby will die, and so will the girl. Beth speaks little Spanish. There are, besides the girl, only men in the encampment. If the girl and the baby die together, there may be violence.

Beth kneels at the girl's side, asking for water.

“*Agua,*” says the Salvadoran sadly. “*No agua.*”

But perhaps, instead, he does bring water. And Beth, after all, has her instincts: she finds clean rags, boils a knife, murmurs soft comforting syllables. The baby slips out, whole and alive, without much more trouble or pain. People celebrate with singing.

Beth turns back in horror when she sees what is happening, runs, stumbling, down the ravine, flees to her car, drives home to Ian where she says, “I never meant it, Ian, marry me, Ian,” and he does.

Beth delivers the baby and takes the baby home to raise it as if it were her own.

Beth sends the baby off to live with the brakeman in Montana and his children, where the baby's presence makes the children wholesome and drug-free throughout their adolescence as they strive to set a good example for the baby. Beth and Ian visit twice a year.

“I am not the oppressor,” Beth says as they discard her. “Someone else is the oppressor, not me.”

Beth lies down with the girl and weeps.

How delicate the handwork of this Washoe basket really is, how rich the dark brown of the ancient mud-dyed fern that traces its elaborate zig-zag pattern through and around the redbud, the willow, looping, looping, embracing the circumference, pure, unreadable, willow, split willow. What hands wove these raw reeds when? Or, the bits of cloth: who wove them? All these displaced people: the Hmong in Montana, my grandfather, Beth and her dumbstruck Salvadoran. I imagine the Indian weaving the basket. She squats in the dust, head, whole body bent over her materials, her dark hair glistening like flint. Circa 1890. She works painstakingly but swiftly, her fingers dancing among the wet, pliant twigs. I believe that, though this is a gift for, say, a wedding, she does not anticipate the children the marriage will bring forth; she does not look forward into the next century because it is already over for them and surely she must know this in her heart. I believe that, even so, as she works she must remember, and as she must remember, she must dream. But what must she dream—oh, what?

At the open flap of the tent, the Salvadoran grabs Beth by the arm and says, in English, “Let her be.”

Beth tries to shake herself free but he tightens his grip, and she stops. The girl, Beth knows, will die—a breach birth and in such wretched circumstances—but Beth cannot think of the words in Spanish, and so simply says, “No.” The Salvadoran pulls back at her while on the blanket below, the girl moans softly. “Who is she?” Beth asks in a whisper, not moving.

“No one,” says the Salvadoran. “Just a wanderer.”

“Just a wanderer,” Beth repeats numbly, and the words feel strange and unfamiliar in her throat, like another language altogether, something she cannot understand.

“She will die,” the Salvadoran says. “Let her be.”

“Let her,” Beth repeats, “be.” Then she says it again, “Be.”

Now, for the rest of her life Beth will try to remember exactly what happened, but that is the difficulty, the complication, for even in her memory, the possibilities proliferate. She can remember standing in the open flap of the make-shift tent while the girl writhes below her in the agony of birth, she can remember that. And she can remember the touch of the Salvadoran, both powerful and intimate, peremptory. She can even remember the dull cast of light, darkening now into evening, the grass and all the hills

around turning from bright gold to brown. And she believes she remembers entering the tent. But there it ends, her memory, and with her memory, her dreams; for did she, as she sometimes thinks, place her hands inside the girl?

Did she grip the baby?

Did she pull?