

Poems by *Robert B. Shaw*

Willows by the River

Here comes a man to make a myth of us.

He lets his eye glide up from our gripping
 toe-knuckles, wondering up our dusky stems
 into the streaming leafmanes that the slightest
 wind excites to whispering, a mild
 voice to meld with the river's mild voice.
 He counts us: three, and says to himself, "Three sisters."
 Not for the first time, we notice how
 easy it is for us to overhear
 a pensive passerby in conversation
 with no one but himself. Would-be-explainer,
 he seems to know about us. Should we listen?
 Soon enough he tells how we were down here
 washing our hair when some unlucky fisherman
 saw us and decided to get fresh,
 which led us, when our honor was at stake,
 to call for Father (we were well connected).
 The classic way to balk unsought advances,
 the usual outcome: we armored in bark,
 he, transformed to one of those bottom feeders
 that had disdained his hook

It could have happened—
 something along those lines. We don't remember.
 Listening all this while as we have
 to what the river whispers, to our own
 answer when breezes bend us over the water,
 visits on us a trance quick to resume
 when other voices fade. We're flattered, though.
 It makes a pretty story. Looking at us.
 he could have seen us just as we are and said,
 oh, anything: "Three hula skirts on hatracks."

Memory

A book that has contrived to hide itself
from you for months turns up one afternoon
point-blank, as you reach for a nearby volume-
misshelved, of course, and who's to blame for that?
You bring it down and plant it on the table
under a decent light and open it
to where you think you'll find the passage you
were hoping for, ensconced in some eventful
middle chapter. But the spine is tight,
spring-loaded, you might think, so avidly
the pages rise whenever you lift your thumb
and flip back to the outset of the story,
determined that you not skip the beginning
without which, after all, nothing makes sense.

How commonplace it grows to lose your place
when every search withers to retrospection.
There by the window glazed against a view
you know by heart and rarely choose to look at,
the fanned pages practice recalcitrance,
harking back as if they were enraptured
atavists, or as if they gave themselves
up to a breeze you can't feel on your skin.

Robert B. Shaw teaches at Mount Holyoke College. His latest collection of poems, *Solving for X*, was published in 2002 by Ohio University Press as winner of the Hollis Summers Prize.