

Stories of Separation— What Happens to Those Left Behind

Garnett Kilberg

The Musician. By Eve Shelnutt. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987. 176 pp. \$9.00 paperback.

Although it is becoming a cliché to say that a fiction writer has achieved a blend of poetry and prose whenever the prosaic is avoided, it's impossible to read Eve Shelnutt's third collection of short stories, *The Musician*, and not notice that she accomplishes just such a mixture—without its being a mere exercise in avoidance. Shelnutt has said that words affect her physically; in turn, she is able to use words, idiosyncratic images, and unusual syntactic arrangements to affect her readers so wholly that it's difficult to read more than one or two of her stories in a single sitting. Perhaps her style is best explained by a Shelnutt character who imagines telling her mother, an advocate of reading to children, "Words, Momma, eat like sulfur, come out rolled around the motorized tongue, and your children didn't know what to do with the power. I think now that when we talk, we aren't meant to remember our tongues, how, stretched out, their muscles, oars through water, pull our hearts." When we read Shelnutt's stories, we remember. This is not to say that the language makes her stories inaccessible, because there are sixteen fine tales here—complex stories of families and relationships, many of which deal with separation, being left behind, and with waiting in such a way that those not present assume as much importance as those we see. So important are these absentees that in one case, no one at a Thanksgiving meal mentions them because, as the narrator elucidates, there was "no need; they seemed to assemble behind our chairs, changing places behind us as if looking over our shoulders at cards we held, placing bets in whispers."

In "Angelus," the mother's death—which makes the narrator

and her sisters move "like cows at twilight, [the mother's] body a salt lick"—serves as an impetus for the narrator to recall her childhood, a time when if she and her sisters weren't left physically, they were spiritually: "momma, after daddy left us, more or less gave up on us. . . ." This is such a natural state that when Calvin, the mother's caller, makes a house "with fixed screens and two flushing toilets" a real possibility, the narrator and her sisters connive to get rid of him. The oldest sister issues orders from her sickbed so that the other two go "hopping around the gravel drive by [Calvin's] Chevy to [lean their heads in his window and tell him], 'momma still loves our daddy . . . more than anything.'" But even though they dispense with him, Calvin, like the other absentees in this collection, is not really gone because "for momma's sake" the narrator misses him, and envisions "him as shrunken, his back . . . thin as a beetle's arms waving like little legs when the body's overturned." Years later, after the mother's death, at the time the story takes place, the narrator hunts him down and visits him at his nursing home. But this act of atonement does not prevent the sense of being left behind from continuing, for the narrator has been given her "poppa's and his last wife's boy, loaned [to her] for his safekeeping when Libby refused to believe that [poppa had] died on her. She went [the narrator thinks] looking for poppa in roadside bars, T.V. stations, used car lots, the places where in this civilized world anything can happen. . . ." Though the separations aren't over, there is a resolution, one that is alluded to earlier in the story when the narrator says that the only "really plausible enticement" are those things which can't be proven—and how better to avoid the burden of proof than by leaving behind those who expect it?

'Disconsolate'—the story of Irene, a woman so ruled by her son's absence during the Korean conflict, that she is rendered dysfunctional—is almost an extended definition of the word the title bears. The reader is made to feel disconsolate. Irene is so disconnected that "when she [speaks], it [is] as if her lips were a pea pod unzipping to reveal pellets of words lined up separate, and with a life of their own." Avoiding her son's room because it seems to hold "a stranger's privacy," she spends her afternoons wandering from room to room while "the air, in deference, seem[s] to still itself," the only sound "the scuff, scuff of her house slippers and the ringing of the party line." She thinks of being European "since all foreign daughters grew upon their faces at age fifteen that look of repose, history irreplaceable and so essential it was like breath. Their bodies mov[ing] automatically with, if not hope, then the grace of knowing some inevitable truth." But what bothers Irene the most is

Rufus, a hired hand employed to fill her son's place on the farm. Wanting to know nothing about him, she can't bring herself to look at his face; even holding his plate makes her shudder at "the awful intimacy of it." Her hatred of him is strongest when he is alone, "the history she couldn't imagine flitting around him like flies." At the end of the story, Rufus's wife and sons—the embodiment of his history—show up, forcing Irene's mouth open, "all she had wanted to say for months beginning to assemble." Irene rushes at the wife, holds her, "reaching down to beat on her back," only to reveal when she's pulled away that she's achieved the state of being the foreign daughters have bred into them for "on her face was etched a look of pure repose which, so foreign to [those present] resembled ferocity, applicable at any time."

If "Disconsolate" is the most desolate of the stories, certainly "Goodbye, Goodbye" is the most delightful. The absentee in this story is Sukie who—like a "monarch cracking spring's cocoon"—runs away from home. Left behind are the narrator (Sukie's sister), the mother, and a group of well-meaning, if inept, family friends bringing food and offering suggestions. Shelnut's dialogue in this story is particularly engaging since the characters cannot utter a cliché without making us reconsider the connotation. For example, when the mother shrieks at the suggestion that the father (also an absentee) be called, the suggestion's volunteer says, "it was *just* a thought," making us wonder how "thought" ever came to be so easily preceded by "just." The characters ponder Sukie's whereabouts until clues in the form of hat bills from local stores begin to arrive. The narrator follows Sukie, along with her "swinging box" and a boy in uniform from Ft. Wayne, from one of the stores to an apartment over Renquist's Jewelry where Sukie has been hiding out. Here, the narrator learns that Sukie had to depart or suffocate. Eventually, the narrator, too, will need to leave to avoid the same fate, but not before a marvelous rendering of all the hats, like so many straw frisbees, being tossed from the apartment window, over the canopy, into the traffic below while the narrator imagines herself saying to someone, "a lot of money down the drain."

The most oblique, as well as the most powerful and haunting, of the stories is the title story which deals with a myriad of separations. Pervading "The Musician" with their ghostly presence are the narrator's husband's son (whom he's never seen) and mother (who is dead), the narrator's twin (who is dead), her half brother (who arrives only in photographs sent by mail), and her son who has never seen his parents together on the other side of a room—an

omission which the narrator feels "changed the way [her son] stood, how he held his head, changed even the air in which he stood." Most significant in this complex web, which flashes forward and backward in time, is Juanita, the narrator's mother, who "came in dreams not initially to participate but to stand, a coalescence, at the edge of rooms barn-sized, open on two sides, weeds growing to the floor boards." Through these dreams, Juanita is teaching the narrator "what death, or music meant." It is only when the narrator's husband goes with the narrator to visit Juanita that the dreams cease, a natural occurrence since Juanita is now right there in the next room "sleeping on the couch in her own house." Unlike the way she appears in dreams, Juanita is quite ordinary in real life. Though, of course, it is unfair—as Juanita herself seems to realize at the end of the story—that those we see in the flesh, with all the constraints of the body and of everyday life, are never as powerful as those who, by virtue of their absence, we're free to imbue with the endless resources of our minds.

Though not all the stories work with separation and abandonment, many do, and of those which do, most have an absentee husband and/or father. Usually these men have left their families ostensibly to seek fame and fortune in places like Hollywood or New York, though it's more likely they're really trying to escape the responsibilities of a family to chase impossible dreams, and be able to afford fancy cars and pin-striped suits. In "Partridges, 1950," the father sends a map of Santa Barbara with the radio station where he works circled. In "Family" while the father is off making connections, the mother fills "their days of waiting with trips to Harris by Greyhound [where] the man at the A&P [gives] her bones for the dog. . . ." Before the father returns, the dog manages to become pregnant and have pups which grow to maturity. In "Andantino," a girl sneaks to a neighbor's (one who fills her days waiting for her husband) to hear her father the only way she can, at "thirteen-point-nine-on-your-radio-dial." But sadly, these fathers are almost as distant and detached when they're close at hand. In "Voice," on a visit home the father is quick to notice the neighbors have a phone, a device he can use to keep in touch with the places he'd presumably rather be—Los Angeles, New York, Miami. In "Tutelage," though the father is supposed to be off making his fortune, his daughter, Annie, catches a glimpse of him in the "Negro section of Greer . . . leaning out [the back of his father's truck], selling greens and corn while dressed in his suit coat." Of course these men are spiffy dressers, never forgetting appearances. With nary a trace of bitterness, the narrator in "Renters" notes

when her father and sister laugh that they have good teeth—"hers because she is young and his because he visits the dentist regularly though no one else in the family is allowed the expense." It's no wonder that she, like many of the other characters in these stories, is tolerant of such behavior, because to know these men is to know that they're poised, ready to leave at the slightest provocation—like a request for money for necessities. And none of these characters wants to be the one to provoke such a separation, so dear are the ones who leave them behind. If there's a man who ever reasoned—or worried—that leaving his family would create no void, these stories will make him think again. But there's no need to go to such an extreme to read *The Musician*; what Shelnutt is able to do with language, and what the stories reveal about surviving separations, are reason enough.