

## Review · *Melissa Greene*

*The Musician*. Eve Shelnutt. Santa Rosa:  
The Black Sparrow Press, 1987. 176 pp.  
\$20, hardback; \$9, paper.

While fiction, generally, has concerned itself with characters who venture forth—in buckskin, armor, or pinstripes, in person or imaginatively—to novel latitudes and emotional encounters, the fiction of Eve Shelnutt has concerned itself with characters who stay home. Wives and daughters of handsome, footloose, perennially absent men, the heroines receive souvenirs, postcards, inheritances, and occasional visits, but chart no voyages more adventurous than from the front porch to the peach orchard and back. They love music, and are prone to headaches, and can be seen at rest in the faded light of a living room at dusk, listening to a classical recording, pressing a damp towel to their foreheads, going without dinner. The characters live in the South, in the 1950s, with its backdrop of red clay yards, church pie suppers, VFW bands, cotton dresses with small floral patterns, and the Korean War. They live among cousins who say things like “Anybody to home?” and “I baked an extra cake so y’all’d have something to bring.” They are astute, precise, acerbic women, who make observations like “Calvin had been fat for so long his suits fit.” But the central fact in the lives of these women is that they and their children are home, and their husbands are not.

If Ahab had had a wife, a small plump resourceful woman, perhaps, who periodically scanned the horizon with her own spyglass; if Huck Finn’s Ma had lived and were willing to take back Pap despite his drinking and bad temper; if *Jude the Obscure* had addressed itself less to Jude and his complaints and more to Arabella and hers: *Arabella the Still More Obscure*; if Eugene Onegin had left a wife and teenage daughters in a villa in St. Petersburg, straining to catch word, in the fashionable drawing rooms, of their playboy papa in the countryside, then there would be a longer history for this particular perspective, these finely drawn portraits of those who wait at home. Jane Austen’s characters, of course, spend an inordinate amount of time in armchairs and around dining room tables, but Emma, Elinor, Marianne, and Anne Elliot unquestionably are the heroines

of their own hearthside adventures. The descent to Shelnutt's women seems to be straight from Homer and his portrait of celibate Penelope waiting twenty years for her hero to return.

Penelope wove her famous tapestry by day and pulled the strings out of it by night to stave off the gang of wooers who swore to marry her when the weaving was complete, but the tapestry was symbolic of her state of mind as well: her unwillingness to get on with her life without Odysseus. She *will* weave a new life out of widowhood, say her days; she will *not* begin a new life; she will undo such betrayal of her perhaps still-living husband, say her nights.

The wives in Shelnutt's stories — wives the men don't divorce but don't live with either — weave new lives for themselves and their children each day, and tear them apart, out of yearning, at night. The cumulative effect, as years pass, is of lives lived almost motionlessly, almost changelessly, as if stillness could stop time, as if the fidelity of the heart could preserve youth. The male in these stories is, typically, 37 and handsome. He hopes to make a living on his own good looks and natural born talent. He shows up on movie sets in Hollywood, flashing his perfect smile in the hope of getting a walk-on part. Landlocked, back east, the wives live like sailors' wives, not *quite* forgotten, not precisely abandoned.

The wives live half-lives, in which closet and drawer space is saved for the missing husband; and the children grow up in the half-light of their mothers' distracted attention, and try to cuddle up with the sparse memories they have of their father. Josie, the youngest child in "The Black Fugatos," excitedly tells the babysitter "that she's parking *her* car in the spot where *he* washes *his* car when he comes." The artwork of the child Anna in "Questions of Travel" is all "yellow, and half-finished: suns without middles, flowers without stems, boats without sailors, shoes without feet."

The strange and subtle and beautifully written stories in Shelnutt's third collection, *The Musician*, are studies in how it is not possible to live without love; how — with the man gone — it is necessary to make absence itself companionable; how neglect comes to be the one thing which is reliable. The story "Questions of Travel" begins with the line: "'Suppose,' said Anna's mother, a shudder running across her chest, 'he comes while I'm ironing?'" Of course he does not, but the sliver of expectation is delicious and gets her through the evening. At Thanksgiving, Anna and her

mother, Irene, go to buy a turkey “in case he should come.” (He doesn’t.) With adult hindsight, Anna comes to understand about her years alone in the small house with her mother: “That he *might* come was the habit, like a fish’s gills opening, which meant, as if it were the proper environment, saline enough . . .” In other words, the absence of the father was itself the life of the family and not, as the child felt it to be, an interruption, an aberration, a terrible interlude.

Penelope was lucky. The gods kept her hero from her. What keeps the fathers of Anna, of Josie, of a dozen other daughters in these stories from coming home to stay? The answers differ, depending upon who in the story—the mother or the daughter—is asking the question. The story “Questions of Travel” turns upon the mother Irene’s recognition that her husband has another life: he is not simply *not here*. The life she has built around his desertion, a life of waiting for him to arrive and of longing for his lovemaking and of treasuring the odd masculine item he leaves behind when packing after a brief visit, does not as well sum up *his* life. Her life changes when she finds herself suddenly able to picture her husband in his California bungalow with a long-legged young lover whom he kisses in her sleep.

In the stories in which the point of view is the *daughter’s*, the mother is found to be more at fault. The nervous, intelligent, unhappy young girls seem to phrase the question “What ails you, that he cannot live with you?” and the answers they find have a child’s hopeful simplicity: Father does not live with Mother because Mother cannot be lived with. In “Renters,” the jaunty, unemployed father comes home for a visit. The middle daughter, the narrator, watches her parents closely at dinner:

He talks about California; she asks polite questions. “So,” he says after a while, “I told him, ‘Hell, no, I wouldn’t work for that,’ and he said, ‘Right, you won’t,’ so we left it at that. What do they think I am?” he asks.

She eats two more bites of the tossed salad . . . “Lou,” she says, “I need money to fix the car with.” I hold my breath, saying *No, no, not yet*, but she goes on. “The valves are going. I took it to the dealer in Pickens and he said . . .”

As he rises and throws on the table the napkin she ironed for him this morning, I see her eyes look startled, but I cannot believe them anymore. If I know about her voice and her eyes, she must know about his. He had warned her the minute she said *need*. I saw his eyes hold and his nostrils flare . . .

The child narrator leaves the table to escape to the outdoors; on her way out, she glances at the mantle clock and thinks, "Dinner has taken fifteen minutes. They are at it."

Eve Shelnutt, of Spartanburg, South Carolina, is a Professor of English in the creative writing program of Ohio University. She has been composing these elegant, quiet, precise stories for a decade. *The Musician* is her third collection, after *The Love Child* in 1979 and *The Formal Voice* in 1982, both winners of university-sponsored fiction awards. Her first short story won the Mademoiselle Fiction Award, and her stories have been anthologized in *Stories of the Modern South*, *O. Henry Prize Collection*, and *Stories for the Eighties: A Ploughshare Reader*.

The plots in the majority of her stories are remarkably the same. It is as if Shelnutt, sitting down to her typewriter, asks herself each time: given an itinerant, rakish, debonaire father, given a sloppy lovesick mother, given several stern-eyed appraising daughters, given a cultivated taste for formal culture, acquaintance with Emily Dickinson and Chopin in a family barely able to raise rent money, where will the pressure of family strife and genteel poverty break out this time? Each time it breaks out anew and differently and idiosyncratically, and Shelnutt is there to capture the moment's every nuance and import, with its every trace of humor, bitterness, passion, and sorrow.