

FLASHOVERS

Susan Mitchell

She approached me. As if I were a doorway. Or a subway vending machine that dispensed peanuts, and she wanted some peanuts. She was eight or nine and wore high-heeled shoes and sequins that shimmied down to her ankles; around her shoulders, a boa of pink feathers to fly away in, above streetlights and snow, when the desire came over her. *Let's garbage the night.* She was not at all wary. She showed me her Malawi Eye Biters and *a peony that drank blood from other children's wrists.* She said *children.* Not *kids.*

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Runaway, field rabbit, waif, little hobo. She was on a chlorophyll high that sent me to the Internet for police reports, missing children, case histories. But why did I search for her outside — when she occupied that ambiguous space just behind or in front of my eyes. And why did I think of her as homeless? Or that she had ever had a home? Could something inside you run away — all its fireflies in a panic, no longer able to signal or send out perfumes of light? Where would it go? I could see her, hand on hip, staring from a carton of milk, but not imploring, please find me, I'm lost; I've been abducted, please save me. *What I wore as a child were two / shots of whiskey with my head thrown back.* And why did she say *as a child* when she was — when she is — a child? Though for how long I can't say. Something strange happens to time when she's near me. *Before now afterward later too soon* no longer have meaning. Perhaps her childhood is older than my life.

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Tonight I bought two URLs. Susan Mitchell was already taken by a realtor, so even though it goes against the grain, I snatched up *susan-mitchellpoet.com* for the next ten years, and also, *susanmitchellpoet.net*, just in case. I don't think of myself as Susan Mitchell or poet or even

woman. I'm not a noun. If anything, I'm more of a verb through which other verbs come and go. True, sometimes seemingly from nowhere comes an urgency calling out Susan, and I stop whatever I'm doing to turn toward what has no direction or place. But there must have been a time when names would have flown right past me, and I would have gone on rummaging through drawers, smelling clothes in other people's closets, opening bottles on vanity tables for a whiff or a dab. The word *peignoir* you could wear like a gold ring in the tongue. Or a tattoo inside your cheek to be shared with a special few. There was one closet that always smelled cold. Even the coats. If I blew on the beaver coat, a trail opened through drifts of bleached snow. Something exposed, scalped to disappointment.

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Subtitle B of Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines the homeless as those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. By that definition I am homeless. Night after night I wander through train stations and hotels or drive my car along unfamiliar streets. I have even spent a night in a cliffside house with one wall missing: ocean swirled over tables and chairs, over rocks close to my bed; ocean pursued me from room to room. And last night, as I cooked dinner on an old stove, the sleeve of my bathrobe burst into flames. What if I hadn't awakened in time? Yes, it's true the house I own is more than satisfactory, maybe even beautiful. But do I live in that house? Once I slip away from Diana Krall's voice singing *The Girl in the Other Room*, once I lose touch with the notebook, pen, and flashlight on my bed, where do I reside? Perhaps the child ran away when I failed to record her appearances in dream after dream; when I slept past our meeting inside the long-closed factory where she walked barefoot over splinters of glass. Is failing to take note a form of abandonment? Is forgetting?

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On the other hand, she might have shown up because of the white piano. An old upright. If I had bought a black piano, it would not have lured her into the open, swinging her satin purse. *We ate each*

other good / to the last drop in doorways and basements. Maybe she was a piano nymph or a tree nymph inseparable from the wood the piano was made from. Part of the tree's memory system. And the piano's. It was her voice the piano was in love with because she could sass notes that fell between the piano's keys. And those tongue curls, those lip rolls as she upped and downed scales, reaching for notes high in her cheek bones, way above whistle range. It was her voice that sang the piano awake, her voice the piano heard whenever certain songs were played. With that voice comes smoke, comes crackling of ice in glasses as Scotch is poured. Whenever you sing that song I'm dancing / with someone else, but singing with you.

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Balthus's girls are older. They have breasts. Nor is she like the child in Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Bebe Marie)*. That child looks out through bare branches. This child has run away from those branches. She escaped and is never going back. Cornell's child is erotic only because we sense someone is looking at her, some marginal man who lives on the edges of daylight. It is his stare we see smeared all over her. Nor is she like the children a night concierge keeps hidden in a special photo album. For dollars or euros, a child can be opened up and served to taste. In whose eyes the photographer's flashbulb is still going off. My child has evaded all stares.

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The Chinese pictograph for home is a doorway. Just five brush strokes. The entrance standing for the whole. But which way is out? And which way is in? Or doesn't it matter whether the wind blows from inside or outside? I button up my jacket, wrap my scarf tighter. Perhaps the child is a pictograph for mood. *Mood* from Old English *mod*, meaning *mind, disposition*. *Mod* from Old High German *must*, meaning *spirit*. Let's clink glasses. Let's spirit away. Let's drink a toast. *Let's do the minnow and be water under the bridge*. Listen, the child is singing.

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Sometimes, to escape her, I go to snowy mountains and read. The snowy mountains are in a painting by Xiao Yuncong, a Chinese artist who lived in the seventeenth century. Whenever I try to find the cottage where I am reading, it takes a long time. I scan tops of mountains, I scan huge crystals and octahedrons of ice. Down, down, down I look for signs of human habitation, some cottage with a light in a window, until finally, in a hut almost crushed by boulders and gnarled tree roots, there I am, reading by the light of a fire. What a joy to read deep inside a mountain. Melville's Ishmael would say, *There I lie like a warm spark in the heart of an arctic crystal*. On my knees, *The Book of Huts*. The roof of one hut grows into the side of a hill. Inside, Gustav Mahler sits at a piano, composing *Das Lied von Der Erde*. In another hut, Heidegger is writing. *Buan*, he writes. *To dwell is to be at peace. To be safeguarded. When we leave something to its own nature, it is safeguarded*. On another continent, Eugene O'Neill stands in front of his beach shack and watches the sun sink into the dunes of Peaked Hill Bars outside of Provincetown. He sloshes the ice in his drink as he observes a man not yet named James Tyrone slosh ice in his drink. Is this other man an image in O'Neill's mind? Or is he cut out of paper? And what do you call yourself when you are not sure?

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There must be times when the child appears, and I am not there to receive her. Is that when she wanders into a pet shop and curls up with the puppies? When she ghosts the ballroom of a hotel, does splits on the bar, sambas the piano's keyboard from treble to bass like a bird quick-stepping the leaves of a hedge? Or, is that when Mahler's first-born, Maria-Anna, all six years of her, sings beyond death? — to a child who listens intently at dusk, as if she were trying to hear from deep in the earth a name she never knew she had. Is that when the boy in Schubert's *Erkonig* dances the waltz or the Ländler with her, as snuggled under the cape of the boy's father, they gallop off into the night? Or, no — it's Schubert carrying her in his arms as he paces his room, as he cries out *Mein Vater!* and hears for the first time the dissonance between voice and piano.

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Or perhaps she is a pictograph for *deeper in*. There is no end to *deeper*. Like a mystery in search of a solution, she is seductive, always promising more. If I follow her into the abandoned station and push aside the sign that reads Entrance Forbidden, will we hear the train that is not coming, but used to stop at this station, the tracks trembling with the sound that once signaled arrival. If we listen long enough to that sound, will we see through the steamy windows of the train men reading newspapers, women carrying shopping bags? Will we glimpse the man who might be her father? Will he be wrapped in gauze? Or will he glisten as only ice can glisten? The rails gleam under lights still turning on and off. Will we. Will we. Will we.



Sometimes a muscle is cut inside a song, and one part of the song stops dancing with the other, simply walks off and leaves the other looking like a fool in the middle of the dance floor. What do you do with a song that splits in half? Call it *Rumpelstiltskin*? The piano goes on playing, but how does a singer make do with half a song — and the dancer. . . Sometimes when I am thinking, a branch, a real branch from outside, grows into my thoughts, and the bird I was imagining hops onto it, upsetting the precarious. *Whir, whir, whir*, says the bird, and spins itself into gold. If the bird sings from its perch on the branch, should its song be considered imaginary? Or real? And who opened the window? Below the branch where the bird sings, a motherbird is chasing away a fat babybird which lets out pitiful cries as it rushes back to her. The bird on the branch tries out these cries, making them even more pitiful and harder to resist. Should I put myself into the motherbird? The babybird? Should I go look for the dancer standing like a fool in the middle of the dance floor? Or, should I put myself into a long afternoon where a child sits in a hotel lobby pretending she is waiting for someone? If yes, should I think of the child's patience as a doorway and build myself around it? Or, should we walk alongside her patience as if it were a canal? Floating on the canal's surface are leaves and something white and rubbery I can't make out. At the bottom of the canal, a sound thickens and puts down roots. *What took you so long?*

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A moment ago, there was more to her. Now she has thinned. By the time she approaches three tables pushed together for a large dinner party on the hotel's terrace, she will be another child entirely — a child in a short cotton dress and white Mary Janes. When did the switch occur? Or did one child merge with the other? I replay the scene in search of the moment when one child begins to fade and another takes on form and color. If I freeze that moment, I can feel the sadness one child passes to the other so deftly the new child won't know how that sadness entered her, or why from now on she will radiate loneliness wherever she goes. A moment before she had a best friend; now that friend has vanished, abandoning her to silence even as the friend runs from room to room slamming doors, calling out to her; even as the now-alone has no choice but to approach the table where everyone finished celebrating hours ago. She sips a bit of green liquid that remains in a glass, takes a bite of a sugary rose that must have been part of a birthday cake, tightens the strings on her crocheted purse. Which child left the other? And why?

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Is she with you? The maitre d' glances toward five fast-moving pirouettes circling the dining room, compelling me to tear my attention from a large crab whose pink shell matches the marble floor, a crab that must have come in from the terrace overlooking the sea. The pirouettes inhabit an organza tutu and hot pink jelly flip-flops. Am I any more real than she is? She brings with her the I who speaks to you, who exists only in writing and vanishes after all is said and done. With her come the dining room and bar with its bartender so busy muddling mint he is oblivious to us. Perhaps she even brings the crab which has just sidled behind some drapery, the stage curtains closing around it. When she imagines, does she bring me into focus? *Yes, she's with me.*

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Maybe, along with the subway station and miles and miles of track, along with the hotel and the white piano, the child and I are part of something larger, a place so huge it has taken years for us to stumble on each other. That I still don't know her name, or the names of the subway station or the hotel where late at night she does splits on the bar, that the sea captain appears in a later section and, if I ever knew his name, I have forgotten it — but if I knew their names, or even my own name as I write, *They appear and disappear like figures in a medieval town clock still keeping time, but with what I have no idea*, would they have any reason to break into my life? As Mahler observed, *I cannot tell even myself what kind of name I would give to what I have just composed.*

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Tonight I'm designing a website dedicated to moods. If your mood is a lobscause of vodka bottles, or if you are living inside a mood that is someone else's, a mood that has hung on like a winter cold, this website is for you. If, like a hermit crab, you have been living inside someone else's hut, please click on *scuttle* and *sideways*. If you feel encased in your mood, then click on *moult* and be soft and vulnerable as mud. Right now the mood is Jeansboy, so hang out your dreads, rip your fabric, be the engineer of your own sound. On the website still in progress, click *streaming* for scenes from an old documentary that shows the making of a film, now lost, in which Luchino Visconti plays the cello with his teacher, Lorenzo de Paolis. It's 1943. Bombs are falling on La Scala, on the golden *palchi*, on the chandeliers and golden masks with mouths open — as if about to sing. This happened before I was born. The lostness of the cello, the lostness of the opera house, the lostness of voices casting shadows into the future as explosions shatter the first and second balconies. *Che schiffo*, says Visconti, as if a car had just cut in front of him. Even so, Visconti understands that when the child looks into a mirror that cracks her face in two, she must not see herself. She must see an ocean and walk slowly into that first blush of morning washing over her. *No sooner done than thought*, says Visconti. To step into that morning, to enter its greeting, to be — and there she is, the actress Visconti has chosen to play the child. Where did he find a morning so lost in thought as it safeguards its scattered pieces — along with

this moment in the future when we find the broken still intact. To breathe in that shining. To breathe a glimpse of that shining and be on fire with it, not knowing who it may burn beyond repair.

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Was it a week ago, or was it tomorrow late evening, a bird kept crying out a warning. Just when I was trying to forget myself enough to sleep. Why did a bird choose that night to cry out? Aren't there always snakes, hawks, cats on the prowl? Or perhaps it was someone's alarm clock mis-set for p.m. Someone should have awakened yesterday and now when yesterday is no longer here, there comes a persistent reminder. The air raid siren still going off, terrifying the singers in the opera house, terrifying the child hiding under a seat in the abandoned subway station. Or, it's a bird crying in grief only birds understand. Or it's Visconti reminding me to ignite the caesuras and lacunae, all those mysterious pauses when the ocean for no apparent reason holds its breath.

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What does it mean to be out of tune? And what's playing tonight besides *Dirty Martini* and *Between The Sheets* with its arpeggios of rum and Triple Sec? If tomorrow my mood clicks on *A Guide to Alternate Tunings*, will I learn how to stride away in bright jangles, banging the pitch up or kicking it down without so much as a by your leave? Will I discover a music abandoned? A music in exile? Expatriated even from itself? A runaway music? Is it the opposite of being born from a piano, plucked from strings and hammers without the mess of bloody sheets? And is it Jeansboy who thought of splicing and mixing the child's voice with mine, who sitkas and spruces the dialogue between left hand and right, between Schubert and Goethe, between *Mein Vater* and a horse's hoofs shooting sparks into the night? *Let's do the rundle*. Let's aureole a larynx slippery with the mucosa of birth. The child is wearing kohl around her eyes, thick layers of lead sulphide, hexoctahedrals of galena, prophylactic against the sun. *Let's do the prism*. Let's listen to the seed keys blowing about in the wind. Let's twang chords and spinel a twinning.

I would use my own rib if I had to. I would use the cartilage of my left ear to rock-a-bye the song cradle. On the Mohs Scale will we luster a hardness resinous — or silky? Will we scratch the C above middle C? Let's rocketsonde the sol fa re mi squeezing through without carapace or skin. Just begin the beguine of local patois. The vocal cords pitched like someone with arms thrown up in anguish or joy, outcrying on a cross of sounds.

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You might want to count all the questions asked so far. Or you might want to safeguard a song for the night. What is a question anyway? And are all questions meant to be answered? Is it enough that there are threads dangling? In an old folk tale, a river asks for a thread before it will help a child. Sometimes the child and I shadowplay children abandoned in an old tale of our making — will we find them in time? Will the grandfather even see them? Will his breath lead the way, puff after puff hovering in the icy air? Snow covers all but their noses, and look — long red scarves still smelling of fear and tenderness. *Mon amour, n'importe qui / I'm everybody's girl, I'm nobody's girl.* What have you safeguarded against the night?

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To grandfather. To hut a grandfather open to the wind on all sides, yet snug. To grandfather an old man reading *Moby Dick* to Ishmael. To snowy mountain an old man with a blanket over his knees making models of moods at sea. To Queequeg a ship in a bottle. Moods dredged from the bottom of endlessness. To grandfather a sea captain who can sail a child to all those secret places in a day where she can curl up, and dream. To sea captain her far out where whales sound the depths with their singing. To be tied to the must of song fermenting newness. To sea captain a child to navigate by stars and all the sounds a piano can make. *But what of the songs of Calypso, goddess of silence?*

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And what of the near at hand? The shining at the perimeters? Or the music that wells up from groundswell with its taste of magnesium and iron? To drink in those mineral accretions sucked from tsunami and the udders of mountains. On hot spring days the runoff — and I only wanting to repeat *groundsel*, the way you might chew on a sprig of parsley for a taste in the ear.

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In a section I almost discarded, the child and I are watching a firefly light a path on a sliding glass door. Does it matter where the door is? Does it matter that the child and I know next to nothing about how fireflies turn on and off their light? This firefly lights up whenever a firefly outside the door lights up, the two wing to wing, except for the glass door slicing them in half. What if we were to open the door? Would one firefly enter just as the other makes for the darkness outside? There are possibilities I might add to possibilities, endings I might add to endings. But does anything really end? Or does it go on lighting up the brain and the brains that pulse with memory of your brain? To lightning from brain to brain. To flash neuron to neuron. *Let's do the signalman. Let's bug the night.*

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But what do I really know of the child? Perhaps she is seasonal. Not as in winter, spring, summer, and autumn. Not as in monsoon or drought or swoon. Sometimes she is on the other side of my sun. Now I see her, now I don't. Or it's a matter of hemispheres. Am I north or south of my equator? I look in vain for the ecliptic. All I know of her is zodiacal light and a few grains still burning. All I know of the motion I call her music is *gegenschein*, a faint brightening at the edges of my life. Until one night there she is again with her backscatters, her aureole and au revours. The beam of my car picks up her Heligenschein like a tree bright with snow in the depths of summer. A tree that has just stepped out of the woods. What a storm she blows up as she shivers into the car. *When will we get there? Sylvanshine*, I respond. *Cryoanesthesia*.