

The Dream

I had a Regina dream, last night, the night of my dizziness, and it was long and powerful. We were at a closed university we needed to break out of, for some reason. We crawled out through a small opening. I told her how completely in love with her I was, wishing I could be with her, stay with her, see her more often on a regular basis. Nearly awake, I realized my frequent dreams of her (once a year, or so) have the same effect as seeing her regularly. She was in love with me in the dream and very much my one and only. We didn't exchange information about the time we'd spent apart, all these years. On waking, I could feel the pull between us, that was, and is, not soothing. Disturbing, but undeniable.

When I met her, she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I wasn't the only one who thought so, but she chose to live with me for two years, on and off, and on again. What's the attraction of a beautiful woman? Beyond the obvious, I mean. I want to know.

Years before I met her, I drove a red '55 Corvette, a classically beautiful car. I decided, finally, it was a great car to watch go by. To own it was to discover its high maintenance cost, the radio that didn't always work. Ditto the heater. The canvas convertible top leaked, the insurance was expensive, and the trunk space was negligible. Do these qualities transfer to a beautiful woman? Maybe, perhaps, with some women, but Regina was not structurally or mechanically troublesome. She was not mean, bad tempered, spiteful, hurtful, or any other negative. She was a good person. It seemed that she was simply too beautiful.

"She's too much for you," a woman said, at a party, and I hated to hear it. It was an unanswerable truth.

"You lost her," the checker at the grocery said, and I hated to hear it. As arrogant as I might otherwise have been, I had no answer.

I met her at a party I was reluctant to attend. Mike Shore called me and said, "Hey, man, come on, it's a great party. Everybody's here."

I went. I was living in Craig and Alice's basement on 26th Street in the Mission District, San Francisco. It was June of '76, six months after my first one-man show, a revue of satirical characters called "Showtime" at the Intersection Theater. The last week of the show, a large, tall barrel-chested man, with rhino teeth for a necklace, came up to me in front of the theater

and told me I was a natural, a great performer, and he wanted to represent me.

“How long have you been doing this?” he said.

“Two weeks,” I said.

“No!” he said, “Nobody gets that good in two weeks.”

I shrugged.

“Who writes your material?” he asked, “You’re great, but your material stinks.”

“I write my own material,” I said.

He explained to me what was and what wasn’t funny. He said he was an auctioneer at an upscale outlet on Lombard.

“Sometimes, I’ll hold up an electric iron and say, ‘What am I bid for this toaster.’ Now, that’s funny.”

I looked off, down the street, toward Telegraph Hill, and thought, “Hawaii might be nice this time of year.”

I went to Hawaii and sat on the beach, shaking like a leaf in the tropical sun. A guy said I was the most agitated, intense poet he’d ever met. Years later, Sandra Kennedy told me what had happened.

“You know what you did, don’t you? Before that show, you had a nice, safe Steve Brooks persona. Everybody liked you. And then you went out on stage and you blew it to smithereens.”

When I got back from Hawaii, I was feeling pretty good, all things considered. Then I met Regina. It doesn’t matter who you are, how rich or talented, handsome, brilliant, funny, or honorable, no man is good enough for a truly beautiful woman. Why is this so? It’s been twenty-six years, and I still don’t know. But I sort of know. At the time, I was a thirty-four-year-old strong, brilliant, alcoholic, sexual, funny, charming, charismatic, creative artist. I was broke, but in those days, that didn’t seem to matter. Now, I’m an accomplished visual artist, poet, writer and past performer, coming off a bankruptcy and a heart attack. Still broke, but wiser in all the ways one can get wiser, and just as wise in the ways that never change. I’m a happier man, sober, at peace in my heart, clear about all the questions that truly matter, but I still want to know why Regina is such a powerful constant in my vivid dreams.

I sat with an enlightened master, and I’ve written Zen texts and co-wrote a college handbook on human sexuality, not to mention books of love

poems to Being Itself, to women, and to my own fragile, indestructible heart. Still, Regina walks in my dreams. To simply say that she was beautiful begs the question, whatever that means, it's a tautology. I was in love with her, because anyone would be in love with her, as if it was a given. In her case, nothing was a given. Maybe that's closer to the truth.

The Party

Regina was six feet tall. So was I. I joked that the reason we got along so well, was that we saw eye to eye. She was born in Hollywood, second cousin to a big time movie star, the daughter of a handsome man and a pretty woman. Her father's friends began propositioning her when she was eleven. He laughed it off. She wasn't laughing. When I met her, she was half past seventeen. I thought she was twenty-five. I was thirty-four, but I looked twenty-five; we were a perfect match of *desire* and *willing to be desired*.

I went to the party, after Craig blew up at Alice, and I called him a little prince. The party was at Hallie Marks' apartment, and all the other apartments, at a big old mansion on Liberty Street. It was an artists' menagerie that night. I knew, or knew of, half the people there. In the huge, top-floor apartment, with a raised dance floor in the middle of the room, Joe Kleinschmidt, the gap-tooth, socialist revolutionary surrealist held court for as long as anyone wanted to play along in his rhapsodic fantasy. I drank excessively, as was my habit and the social norm for that time and place, and I passed out among the coats on Hallie's bed. I came to, refreshed, and I saw Regina talking to Jim Paris on the back porch. I joined in.

Finally, I said, "Jim, you can leave now."

He left, as if he understood the dynamic he wasn't part of. She and I kissed. It was the best kiss I had ever experienced; full-lipped, giving, receiving, long and heartfelt. Did it happen that fast? Who knows, but it seemed like it did. I found out, later, a fortuneteller had told her she would meet a poet like me. She was open to the conjunction of the stars. We separated, and she went upstairs to talk to a Black guy in his kitchen. I joined some others who told me she was seventeen, and I said, "No, I can't fall in love with a seventeen-year-old."

"Why not?" someone said, and the conversation turned to the nature of poetry in the world. I said I thought poetry ought to return to its origins as an oral form of direct communication, that its separation from the oral had left it to the page, where it broke contact with the audience.

I tracked Regina down and pissed off the Black guy. She drove me home at 4 AM, in her father's white Cadillac. I mocked the opulence, and she said it was her father's pleasure, so why not let him have it? I couldn't disagree. In the morning, she appeared at the foot of my bed. She was like a dream,

except I was so aware of her being real, I couldn't think of her as dreamy. She got in alongside me, and we conversed in some manner lost to time. I said, after a while, "You're probably wondering if I'm ever going to make love to you."

I did. It was statutory rape. Although, at the time, especially in San Francisco, and especially in the circles I was familiar with, it happened without a second thought. She wasn't seventeen, she was incredibly beautiful, and she was real. Long, dark auburn hair, arching eyebrows, large, green, cat eyes, a full mouth, sculpted nose and cheek bones, large forehead, flawless skin, and the demeanor of a Cheshire queen, half Jewish, long-legged, with perfect breasts and wide hips.

In the beginning, and for many months, she had very little to say. She had come of age watching. It was a characteristic of the Jews, I thought, and a characteristic of my own. Her stillness was in response to how she was treated. I thought it was both intriguing and threatening.

She left, later that second day, and I went upstairs for coffee with Craig and Alice. He was a musician, actor, painter, and she was a painter. He and I had done one of my plays together. I had slept with his first wife, after she left him, and I made the mistake of telling him about it. When he and Alice picked me up at the airport after Hawaii, he pulled me aside and said, "Don't fuck my girlfriend." It made me feel bad. I never tried to fuck his girlfriend, who became a friend of mine, and I made a point of making it as clear as I could that I wouldn't fuck his girlfriend.

I was troubled about starting up with someone so young, but Alice and three of her girlfriends told me they'd all taken up with older men, when they were her age. The implicit warning in the women's stories was that I was a calculated fling. I ignored the future. That's not right. I saw the future, and I gave myself up to the inevitable. I knew she would leave me, and I knew I would hurt from it. I didn't care. That's not right. I cared, but I didn't care about caring.

Regina and I made a date for a few days later. I picked her up at her father's Burlingame apartment, where she stayed, when she wasn't at her mother's. He wasn't there. She wore four-inch heels. She was four inches taller than I was, and I thought it was a test. I didn't care. She could test me anyway she wanted. I would have crawled to be with her. I was already crawling.

In the Moment

The woman in the dream wasn't really Regina. In the dream, her beauty wasn't of any significance. She was love, or lost love, or love not being clear. It was the love between a man and a woman, as I imagined it. It was deeply familiar. There was, in my time with her, a bond and a desire, without peace. It felt like two years of one-night stands. It was the earthly equivalent of the enlightened state of non-attachment.

For a while, I house-sat for Daniel Thornton, the man who ran the Intersection Theater. When he booked me into his theater, he thought I was going to put on a revue with a dozen other people. When he found out I was the only one playing the dozen, it was too late. In the end, against his own worst fear, he liked the show.

One night at his house, she and I sat across the table from each other in his small kitchen, and she stared into my eyes. She asked that we hold our gaze and not look away. I tried to look at her, but I couldn't hold the gaze. It was excruciating to stay in the moment, and I was unable to do it.

I doubt if it was a spiritual moment for Regina, except as she imagined it, but maybe I'm wrong. There always was, in her, a capacity for something beyond the ordinary.

My younger brother was 6'8", 300 pounds, and as a result, he was famous everywhere he went. Regina was tall and beautiful. She was more than famous. She caused grown men to stumble and stammer, to forsake their plans and their ethics. Some beautiful women make a profession of how they look. I wondered then and now if Regina could make it a way toward being free. When we sat in Daniel's kitchen, gazing deep into each other's eyes, I felt less free than she seemed to be.

An Open Bag of Money

Ronald Yee said, "Being with a beautiful woman is like walking around with an open bag of money." One day, Regina went running in the park. Golden Gate Park was two blocks from our apartment above Him's Restaurant on Ninth and Judah. She wore a loose white blouse and loose white shorts. I warned her.

"You're a beautiful girl, you're practically naked, and this is the city. Not everyone who lives here is a decent person. Some of them are criminal, and some of them are certifiably nuts. If you go running like that, anything could happen to you."

I can't remember if she changed or not. She seemed oblivious to the condition that was routine in her life.

(One great thing about the past, in the story of a relationship, is that there's nothing yet to happen. There's no future. I can tell the story any way I want. But that's another illusion. I will tell the story in some sort of order, and that order is what's still unknown.)

Breaking the Trance

I came in from work, one day, after painting a house. It was my new occupation. I worked with Kurt Dietz, my friend and fellow artist. Kurt was a filmmaker, painter and writer. He had won out in the competition for the attentions of Mary Spring Rains, and I never begrudged him his victory. I thought he won because he deserved it. He was macho to my manly, powerful to my strong, demanding to my uncertain.

He took me on as a trainee-assistant-partner, and I did well enough to continue with him for several years. Painting all day could induce a trance-like state, and when I got home, I began to talk to Regina in an unfocused babble.

After a bit, Regina, standing facing me with a quarter cup of lukewarm coffee in her hand, tossed the coffee in my face. It startled me back to the present and to her presence in it. I laughed. I thought it was beautiful. It wasn't brave or personal. It was exquisite.

Her New Outfit

Regina's family didn't fight me being her boyfriend. Her father's only words to me were, "When you're done with her, let her go." I was stunned. He was wrong on all counts. I knew I would never be done with her, and I would never willingly leave her. Her mother said, "I know your type. I saw you, striding down the street, so sure of yourself." She was as wrong as he was. Her sisters treated me like I was Regina's new outfit, not without reason, and, on balance, a kind of acceptance. Six months into our relationship, she was eighteen, and we were safe from the long arm of the law, if not the long tongue of gossip.

In the War

I went to a party at Mary Rain's house. The baby she had with Kurt was one year old. Geno Benson was there. He had told me, long before that night, that several years before, he'd come to my door in Married Student Housing at San Francisco State, intending to kill me, for five nights in a row. Apparently, I was not at home. Or it never happened. Geno admitted he was dropping a lot of acid in those days. He said he wanted to kill me because I was a vampire. He decided to do that, at a party at Steve and Eileen Price's house in Berkeley. Eileen is the woman who wrote "Conversation with a Vampire."

I remember playfully biting Geno's girlfriend on the calf at one of the Price's parties. Geno started hassling me about something at Mary's party, and I told him, "If you want to keep fucking with me, I'll throw you out that fucking window." I had no real plans to do that, but it shut Geno up.

Somebody said I was living with a seventeen-year-old, and I said, "You don't think a seventeen-year-old can be a full-fledged human being?" and they said it was possible.

Mary's friend Serena, a psychiatrist, took a liking to me. Regina showed up with her sister, Raven, and soon after, they left. I ended up in the bathroom with Serena, then in her car, then in Berkeley, in her apartment, then her bed, then in her car, back to the City, into Golden Gate Park, having awkward, bare-ass sex in the woods, at dawn.

Then I went home to Regina, three blocks away. I realized Serena was my type, smart and pretty, and I felt awful in my betrayal of Regina. No, I can't say betrayal. I was fucking around. It was par for the course. It was an attempt, on my part, to believe I was not hopelessly bound to Regina. I was bound to her, as surely as a big dog is bound to an invisible stake in his owner's front yard.

Now I imagine someone saying, "This is ancient history. You must talk about this stuff all the time," and I say, "Are you kidding? It's been twenty-six years, and this is the first time I've been able to talk about it." It's like people who go to war and then can't talk about it, for years, if ever. I told Pat Goepel, one night, speaking of Roxanne, "In the war between the sexes, I wanted to take on the best the enemy has to offer."

I told him that at a party at Pat and Mindy's house. It was a party for Mindy's father, who was visiting from Maine. He was reputed to be a prejudiced small town Jew, not happy about Mindy being with Pat, who was a lapsed Catholic. At the party was Mary and Kurt, unmarried, with their baby, also Mark and Len, a gay couple, little Italian Jenny and her black lover, Ruveen, me and Regina, and Darryl and his girlfriend, Liz, who was half-Mexican and half-Indian. Mr. Sokol went up to Pat and took a long swig off his bottle of Jim Beam. "Oh, what the hell," he said, and he seemed to have a good time after that.

Agenda of Despair

I found the apartment on Ninth Avenue, and we moved in. After we were there for a couple of months, Regina's father, Ray, told her that, if I wanted, he would set me up in business as a house painting contractor. I turned him down. I didn't know how to say yes. I was still a novice painter. I couldn't imagine how to do it. He asked me if I had a fear of success. I never thought of such a thing. I assumed I'd have nothing but success. Maybe I was afraid of that particular kind of success. I've been painting houses for most of these twenty-six years, since.

One day there was a knock on our door. It was Sunday. We were reading the paper. It was Sheldon Smyth, her boyfriend before me. About my age, a thoughtful, sensitive, mentoring type of fellow, he was concerned about Regina's wellbeing. The two of them talked a bit. I recommended to him that he not come back to see us. "She's doing fine. You don't have anything to worry about," I said.

At our first party in our new apartment, besides the stunned and drooling types and competing poets, a high school friend of Regina's showed up. I saw how young her friend was, in all the ways one assumes a recent high school graduate to be. Dennis Rodemeyer disappeared with Regina for a few minutes, the grease of desire in his eyes, and later, she laughed about his come-on. Even at seventeen and a half, she'd seen every manner of approach. Often, she was the only clear-eyed one in the circle around her.

In the past, whenever I would tell any part of this story, I could detect an agenda of despair and unfinished business. It feels different, this time. I suspect my recent heart attack has brought on this change. My broken-heartedness has been supplanted by real damage and by a sense in the physical body of the reality of my mortality. In some profound physical way, I'm freer, perhaps freer than I felt after my time in India, ten years ago, but that's another story.

And here now comes Regina, again, or my freedom from her, or my freedom to embrace her. In the month after we split up, I did everything I could to be rid of her. I sent all her pictures back to her, I mentally tore up the image of her body, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Nothing worked.

One night, outside The Little Shamrock, after we broke up the first time, when I was several sheets to the wind, I thought, for the one and only time, that if I had a gun, I would have gone to her house and shot her. The feeling passed as quickly as it came, but I understood the desperate measures that men will go to rid themselves of their obsessions. Nothing works, certainly not murder. Not even suicide, I imagine.

One of the photographs I returned was the best I had of her. It was a beautiful portrait, done by her oldest sister, Rowena. In the photo, Regina is seated to my right, slightly above me, with her arm around my shoulder, looking wisely down at me as I sit, pensively, my face in a dramatic cloud of cigarette smoke. It was lovely and romantic. I could not keep it. It was painful to look at.

Eternal Ruse

There are two kinds of heterosexual men. The first wakes up every morning believing that some woman will love him that day. The second knows that that's not true. The first kind of men are happy all the time. Every day is ripe with at least the possibility of love or its common tender, sex. I carried that belief for many years. It isn't just that women have changed toward me. I've had my opportunities. It's that I've changed, as well. My feelings have become not just narrow, but specific. I've been climbing in these mountains for a long time, and I'm interested in those who have a similar outlook. And look good, besides. That specificity narrows the possibilities considerably.

A beautiful body can be erotic, a beautiful face enthralling. A beautiful being speaks the common language of the heart. One afternoon, walking on *The Ave*, i.e., Telegraph Avenue, in Berkeley, I was struck by the number of attractive girls I passed, or who passed me, one after another, after another, after many others. There was no end to the oncoming revelation of beauty. And new generations rise up to replace the multitudes who possess physical beauty.

I'm generally content to enjoy the passing parade of truly lovely human beings. I once woke up every day, assured by my experience, that I would be with someone that day, if I were willing and lucky. Then I met Regina, and I became someone for whom something was going to seem missing, for a very long time.

The Eternal Ruse

I want you to be mine, and I want to be yours, and every time I say that, I want us to laugh at our little ruse, I want us to merge into one, and every time I say that, I want us to laugh at our little ruse, I want us to walk down Paris boulevards and forget who we are and what we're doing and where we're going, and then we can laugh at our little ruse.

I want you to be here, because you are part of me, and I am part of you, and the hardest laugh is to laugh alone at our little ruse, being so far apart for so long a time, learning all we can about the perfect and the imperfect in the world, where learning to be without is a greater ruse than any we could play together, or on each other, knowing the ruse of life and loving the ruse in its face, the eternal ruse of realities, and the ruse of all the rest.

I wrote that poem seventeen years after Regina. I hadn't seen her in seventeen years, and it wasn't written with her in mind, but I knew, as soon as it was written, that it was about her. It was written when I finally became sober, and when I knew I was done with drinking forever. My heart opened, without alcohol clouding it, and love poems came pouring out. It's a pleasure to admit this unbroken connection, after all these years, not with the intention of reconnecting, but in response to a new sense of not being broken.

There's no love in the story if there's no love in the telling. Regina became an icon of my heart, to her credit, to some degree that I can't know. After many years of writing love poems to women, to the Eternal, to life itself, I have come to see that all the love I felt in my life didn't originate in someone else, but came up in my heart, from its own source, in the presence of someone else.

One night, I looked at Regina, in a moment without fear and desire, and I thought, "What if we had all the time and all the love?" It was a startling thought, and I couldn't hold it for longer than that one moment.

In the movie "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" Antonio Banderas plays a man who kidnaps the woman of his dreams, in the hopes that she will come to love him, if only she gets to know him; if he can keep her close to him, long enough for that miracle to occur. I felt something similar with Regina. Every day I came home, and she was still there, was a miracle to me. When a miracle occurs, there's no guarantee it will remain.

One night, she came into the room where I was writing. She was half-smiling, nearly breathless. "I love you," she said.

I looked at her, and I said, "That's phony."

I didn't believe her sentiment was genuine. I might have let her have a try at expressing love, a chance to wear it in the heart for a while. Instead, I ripped it off and threw it away. I wanted to see the most genuine of love demonstrated, and I threw the baby out with the bath water. What was wrong with the bath water, anyway? It was my baby and my bath water, too.

In the months we were back together, after we split up the first time, living in her tiny apartment in Oakland, one day, on the bus, I said, "Our love is like a baby. We need to take care of it like a baby." But by that time, she was gone. Already gone. I was whistling in the nursery in the dark.

Draw Me

I thought about grace and elegance. Chaz Kelsey, Ph.D. in philosophy and former street fighter in the Bronx, said that grace is learned, and that it fades. I saw in Regina a grace that may have been artifice, but where does such artifice come from? She had at least the capacity for grace, and I gave her the benefit of my borrowed doubt. When she walked, she moved like a schooner cutting the waves under full sail. She stood tall like an elegant ship on a calm sea. She was a little stiff. Playing frisbee in the park, one day I tried to get her to loosen up her hips a little, to no avail.

When we were poor, which was often, she would walk to the supermarket on Funston and Irving and ask the men in the back if they had any damaged groceries, and they would load her up with goods; perfect artichokes, asparagus, potatoes, tomatoes, all manner of produce. We would buy a stick of butter and feast. We never went without.

And she had sympathy for those even less fortunate. From our windows, we could see the streetcars stopping at the corner by the donut shop next to the pizzeria. There was a bum who hung out there, panhandling and enjoying his freedom. Chris Jackson said, "We envy the drunk in the gutter his selfish freedom." This grizzled veteran of the street didn't seem to be drunk. Regina, without a word, left the apartment. I watched from my window above the scene as she crossed the street and gave the guy a sandwich she made.

She said, "This is for you," and turned to come back. As she crossed the street, I saw the man examine the wrapped sandwich and toss it in the trash barrel by the corner. Dave Ferrara knew the ways of the city. He went up to two street habitués, one night, held out a five-dollar bill, and said, "Promise me you won't spend this on food." They didn't care about his ironic wit, but they took the five bucks.

Early on, I house sat for a weekend at Rebecca Keeler's city cabin at the top of Liberty Street, the same street where I met Regina, and she came to stay with me. I tell this story, and I hesitate to tell it, for the sensation I experienced there, when she and I made love. I was embarrassed. Not by her but by my recognition of her rather plain and young skin. In the afternoon light, without my nighttime alcohol, I felt foolish to be so enraptured by a big girl, not fully grown. I didn't feel bad about her age. I didn't feel like a

cradle robber. She wasn't a child. She was as experienced in matters of sexuality as most of the women I knew, but I saw something my romance didn't want to see. I saw an ordinary human masquerading in my mind as a goddess.

There were many times in those two brief years when I ought to have known better and didn't. That's not accurate. I did know better, but I was not willing to act on that knowing.

That last paragraph is an example of my thought, early on in this story, that the telling of the past has a quality of the unknown that is left to the telling. When I started this chapter, I was apprehensive, because I had prejudged the outcome, and then the telling revealed something that wasn't clear to me before.

I wanted Regina to be the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. When I was a boy, I saw the ad in the back of Boy's Life Magazine that said DRAW ME! It was a drawing of a beautiful woman, almost a cartoon face of imagined perfection, and I fell in love with that face, a cartoon face of perfection. Romanticism. True Love. My Ideal. Regina was a big girl with big features, perfectly drawn. DRAW ME! I did two portraits of her, and both are cartoonish, and, in both, she seems neither elegant nor graceful. My instinct for the real fought with my desire for the imagined. I tried to talk to her about the realities her imagination didn't anticipate. I wanted to make her real, and my desire fought me at every turn.

In the Blood

Regina's father, Ray, left her mother, Rita, before we met. He looked at her fifty-year-old body in bed and said, "You disgust me." He took up with at least one of the secretaries in his own company. In his work, he taught other companies how to set up security systems to protect them from theft. He told me that business life was simple, "You kiss ass above you, and you kick ass below you." Apparently, he was pretty good at both. His wife was below him. He was a big, handsome guy, and his cousin was a matinee idol with a great reputation for success with the ladies.

I guess, now, looking back, that to Regina, I was a bad boy in my behavior, but we came to know each other well enough that I doubt she felt that way, after a while, but I drank too much, and I was willing to tell people what I thought when I did. I regret doing anything that hurt people, and I know I did, but I don't regret the way life has unfolded. It's been a long time since those days, and I lost as much as I gained. Loss and gain, in themselves, are a losing game.

Regina's father was a bad boy in a good boy world. I didn't envy him. He didn't protect Roxanne, and he hurt his wife, without any apparent sense of responsibility. He told his daughters, when they were young, that they were more important to him than their mother was, since they were blood, and she wasn't. I said to Regina I thought that was a terrible message to pass on to young minds who want to see, and believe in, the bond between their parents. Even if blood is thicker than marriage; what about the blood between the girls and their mother? What about the abiding love between a man and a woman?

I was conflicted in my idealism. I was embarked on a great sea of love with a girl who'd never learned to swim, and I was a guy who never learned to sail. My ex-wife and I had made a bargain. We looked at adulthood and made a pact, "If you'll, I'll go." We held hands and jumped. It was a deal made by amateurs, but it worked pretty well, up to the point when we discovered we weren't rowing in the same direction. Rowing, swimming, sailing, no matter how I describe it, I was nearly lost at sea.

I looked at Regina to see if she was an artist. I saw her make a couple of pastel drawings that showed some talent. She began to read Carl Jung, Knut Hamsun, and others I can't recall. I remember her doing some writing, but

you can't make a silk purse out of the desire for silk purses. She seemed to have the creative talent to dress well and look good, to dress a room, to decorate her intelligence with wit and charm, hopes and plans. I began to suspect there was a darkness contained within. She slipped into an evil child's voice, once, for fun, and I saw the face of bitter pain, camouflaged by light flourishes.

In the last days of our being together, I encouraged the hurt to surface, and it did, and the next day, it was gone, and the next day, she was on her way to Colorado.

Another story that I'm reluctant to speak about is our one physical fight. In our apartment, we began to play, after making love, or instead of it. We became physically combative, and I slapped her. I swatted her flanks, and I poked her. I shoved her. I slapped her. As I did, I expected her to drive me off or complain or resist. She did nothing, and I stopped.

"Why didn't you stop me, or at least tell me to stop."

"Because I wanted to find out how much I could take."

"Don't ever let anyone do that to you," I said, "not me or anyone, don't ever let anyone hurt you."

She may not have replied. She hadn't yet found out how much she could take, but I found out how much I could stand to abuse her. Apparently, it was less than she was prepared to take. In those days, there was little stigma against abusing women. In the early days of our marriage, my wife and I had fought, and I slapped her. "You can't do that," she said. "You're bigger than I am, and you can't use physical force." I agreed, and that was the end of that. It occurred to me, later, that I gave up my weapon, but she kept her weapon, a rapier sharp tongue.

Cover Your Eyes

Roxanne got a job working for The Barbizon School of Modeling, as a receptionist. She was a living advertisement for the business; a beautiful young woman, working the front desk, when all the young girls and their mothers came in to sign up for fame and fortune. Nobody got rich and famous from the training. It was the fantasy camp of female glory. I could imagine that men came on to her, all day long, downtown in the big city, but she kept that from me, and I never pursued it.

She was asked to be a guinea pig for Vidal Sassoon on '**Channel 7 Morning Live!**' She had a full head of thick beautiful hair, and Vidal gave her a sculpted cut like a loaf of bread cut in half, diagonally. It contradicted her natural lines, but she was so beautiful, even Vidal's atrocity looked good on her. Her looks almost destroyed Vidal's promotion for his new studio chain, when the local host commented, "She's so lovely, anything would look good on her."

Vidal swallowed hard and changed the subject. I was pissed, upset, saddened, and disappointed. By the time she got home, I also realized how compliant she had been. A guy once told me, when I was her age, back home in Illinois, thinking about being an actor, that if I wanted to make it in Hollywood, there were a lot of things I might have to do, that I might not want to do, in order to succeed. He was implying 'sexual' things.

"Well then, screw Hollywood," I thought.

Regina seemed less inclined to resist the negative. She worked with a photographer, and her 'before and after' photographs were sold to a beauty salon in Oakland, a year after Vidal. I thought the before photo was far more beautiful than the after. I thought, "If you're going to sell beauty, you have to sell the image of women in drag, not their natural beauty."

Regina was not inclined to put on a face. There was, in her, a stubborn inclination to live her own life, but she was young, and she had already put herself under the influence, however benign, of a thirty-four-year-old divorced father, poet, artist, writer and budding alcoholic.

In those days, I drank nearly every day, a pint of booze or a bottle of wine, and more, on occasion. My poverty may have helped keep the quantity down. I drank every day, and every day, I was sober. I liked both states of mind. All of which was common ground for a poet in San Francisco

in the 70s. In fact, I was embarrassed that I'd never been 86'd from a bar, as my friends had been. It was a badge of rebellion and a sign of addiction.

I was inclined to put on a face, painted by bourbon and burgundy. Regina didn't drink. When I was her age, neither did I. She seemed to enjoy being in control, and so did I. Alcohol gave me a way of loosening controls while I maintained the illusion of control.

Her sisters drank and smoked, as did her parents. Her dad's cousin went into rehab for drugs and alcohol and was still beloved by an adoring public. My father said he quit drinking, when he was a young man, "because of the evidence." My mother claimed he dropped me on my head when I was a baby, while he'd been drinking, and that explained why I was "crazy."

Well, at least it explains why I was drawn to booze. My mother was a social drinker. When my father drank, he was sloppy and effusive. When my mother drank, she was charming and friendly. I saw myself in her style. I was a 'good' drunk, often the one to guide the other drunks home. Until. Until, that wasn't true, anymore.

She and I went to another party at Hallie's, after we'd been together a while. The same Black guy was there, and he spoke in a phony radio announcer's voice. I went up to him, drunk, and said, "Why do you do that? Why do you speak in an artificial voice?" I was genuinely disturbed by the pretense. He said nothing.

I came to, in the back of his sports car, as he drove Regina and me home. I was conscious enough to envy them their coherent conversation. The next day I called him to apologize for my behavior, and he said nothing, except, "That's fine."

I can imagine all the meetings Regina must have had with other men. I was not jealous of her. I was certain of her attractiveness. I saw it, every time we were together in public. There was nothing I could have done. The surest way to cover one's nakedness is to cover one's eyes.

Some Shape of Perfection

The poet John Keats, in his letters, said, "I think I have a wrong idea about women." He was probably twenty-two, soon to contract the disease that would kill him at twenty-five. Arthur Rimbaud, the French poet, was a genius at seventeen, the same age Regina was, when we met. I wondered if I had more than one wrong idea about women. Every idea seemed wrong or at least uncertain. I was not curious to learn my wife, who I knew in college. She was an interesting person, and I learned a lot about women from her, simply by being in her company for eight years, but Regina fascinated me.

I wanted to watch her, to see her, to learn, to know. She was an enigma, a puzzle, a mystery. She was quiet and unknown. My cousin, Carol, living in LA as a screenwriter, once described the value of watching movies on the big screen as the opportunity to do what you can't do in real life, that is, stare at beautiful people for as long as you want. I was living with a beautiful person, and I still couldn't stare, but I could keep one eye open.

The longer we were together, the more she spoke. When I met her, she was nearly mute. No one had ever expected her to be articulate, or anything else, for that matter. Years later, at a party in San Mateo, with another beautiful woman, not quite as beautiful as Regina, I witnessed what the world expects from a beautiful woman. Diane asked the dentist, whose party we were attending, if he needed any help with the food, and he looked at her and said, "You just stand there. That's all you need to do."

Regina was intelligent and observant, and I never for a minute thought I was living with an inferior. She operated with fewer words but not with less intelligence. I watched, time after time, at parties and poetry readings, intelligent, sensible, grown men turn into babbling fools in her presence. It was quite remarkable. I couldn't fault anyone. I watched it and I understood, without understanding.

Faced with great beauty, true artistry, genius, natural beauty in all its forms, I'm inclined to react in silence. In Hawaii, barely months before I met her, I was wandering in a museum that included tropical plant life and open-air walkways, with roofs open to the sky. I entered one room and came face to face with a Gauguin painting. I stopped and looked. I watched. I stared. I was enraptured. I moved close and stepped back. I saw raw canvas and startling beauty. A man, another patron, entered, and I jumped, inside. I

felt as if I'd been caught praying and masturbating, at the same time. When the man moved on, I went back to my sensual worship. Something of that occurred in my being with Regina, and something else besides. I wanted our life together to be ordinary, with no loss of the mystery.

Keats also said, speaking of what he called Shakespeare's "negative capability" (the ability to empty himself in the presence of something else) that, "the challenge to a man is to live in mystery, uncertainty and doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason."

She took a bath, and I wanted to honor her privacy, but I couldn't resist wanting to witness her beauty in water. I believe now that my heart is every bit as beautiful as she was, and I believe that witnessing the human heart, in all the ways we live, is just as remarkable. At the time, I was only beginning to discover the pure delight of being witness to beauty in the heart.

Some Shape of Perfection

The Italians once wrote poems of unrequited love,
tributes to perfect women they would never know,
a kind of human deification, an awkward imitation
of love of being itself, discovered in oneself, outside
oneself, by accident, in the house, or on the street.

How else can a human being hope to claim
some shape of perfection, that's come to life
in the simple heart, in the ordinary moment,
between the last breath gone and the next
breath, not yet breathed?

I wanted to take a terrible risk. I wanted to find a way to live with beauty, from day to day, in the most ordinary way, without diminishing my wonder or falsifying our nature. Of course, I had no such conscious thoughts at the time. I was mute on the subject of my poet's heart, and I was dumb in the ways of sustaining of love.

Two Kisses

There were two kisses that defined the beginning and the end of our relationship. Regina later told me that they were deliberate. One was the kiss on the back porch of Hallie's party, when she seemed to welcome me into her courtyard with open arms and open lips.

The second was at a party at Tim Gleysteen's house, in the last weeks before she moved to Colorado, to be with her mother. It was a wild party I missed most of, because I was driving a cab at the time, and I had to work. When I got back from my runs, in the early hours, she was dancing in the kitchen. When I came in, she met me in the middle of the room with a deep and abiding kiss, as wonderful a kiss as I've ever gotten. It was her message of good-bye. I love you, but I'm leaving you.

These calculated kisses did not put me off. Call me a fool, if you like, but the deliberate giving of her sensual self, even for the reasons she willingly divulged, carried even more weight than if they were thoughtless. She meant what she kissed, and she kissed what she meant.

Blood and Turnips

The Iranians at the corner store loved her. They were always delighted to see her, and I swam in her wake. One of the guys had a blond American girlfriend. One day, a year into their obvious love for each other, a new girl appeared behind the counter. A beautiful young girl, fresh from Tehran, she was the man's betrothed. The American girl had to give him up, and neither of the two was happy about it, but ancient family law prevailed and soon, the blond was gone. The dark-haired beauty got her own stool in the store, and life went on.

There was a coffeehouse on our block called The Owl & the Monkey Café. I'd spent time there, in the year before I went to Hawaii. I began to stop there and write. For some reason, after Regina and I had been living on Ninth Avenue for a while, I stopped drinking. For two weeks. It wasn't hard for me to go without alcohol. As I've said, I liked being sober. Since I could come and go with it, it didn't seem like a real threat.

I thought the problems seem to come from my character, when it was exacerbated by booze. Since I was a nice guy, and since I thought I was not tough enough, I secretly cherished my forays into the dark side of the human character. Years later, I would say I was an explorer of the dark side, but that I didn't want to live there. I was conflicted by the pull of these different ways of being. Being with Regina was light, with undercurrents of darker feelings and darker actions.

Regardless, for two weeks, I stopped drinking. Every day, I went to the Owl & Monkey and wrote. What came out of me was a satire of a poetry festival, the invented poetry of twenty invented poets, nearly two a day, seemingly without effort, and to my delight, with such force that by the end of it, I had a show. It was a show I would perform over the next ten years.

Roxanne was supportive of my creative work. She was someone who never said, "Get a job," even when my income fell to zero and we were dependent on the kindness of the produce manager at the supermarket.

The experience of seven years in the poetry scene in San Francisco, at a time when that scene was thriving, came out in *The Blood and Turnips Poetry Festival*. Jay Gilbertson said, "There are five thousand poets in San Francisco and five thousand I-want-to-be-a poets." The stated theme of my festival of poets was loneliness and paranoia, articulated in twenty different ways. Just

as I was beginning to experience the happiness of being in love, I was able to write about the absence of love and belonging, and the desire for them both.

With Regina, I was beginning to fill what's graphically called, in recovery circles, the hole in my heart, and booze wasn't needed, but maybe what happened was only that I stopped drinking for a while, and that opened the door to a greater creativity. Since I was able to write in any condition, it never occurred to me that alcohol was an inhibitor. I've since seen clearly that the openness of my heart was blocked by alcohol. Is. Was. Is no more. I've also come to see that nothing takes the place of alcohol, until alcohol is gone. Then, what takes its place is what's been there all along.

Neither she nor I knew any of this, then. The way she was, and the way I was, was taken, if not for granted, for a given. It was a given that we were who we were. We were living a dramatic and unconventional life, and that's the way we wanted it. At least that's the way I thought I wanted it, and I could only guess at what she wanted.

The Gift of Love

I've been talking about Regina, as if all I was attracted to was her beauty. Testosterone had a lot to do with it, too. Her physical presence was erotic, and nothing in her personality deterred my desire. I've been with, before and since, good-looking women whose attraction lost its power quickly, if not completely, when their personalities, character, or behavior dampened my desire.

It's easy for anyone on the outside of a relationship to assume that beauty is a constant aphrodisiac, but I believe there are movie stars who repulse their lovers. Regina never repulsed me. I'm reminded of her father's revulsion at the sight of her mother's body. I suspected, even then, that his objections weren't physical.

Regina had such beautiful breasts that I was helpless to ignore them. There were times when it was criminal to restrain myself. She was tall and lean, but she was not skinny. She was curvaceous. What a complicit word. Even saying it evokes image upon image. She was a willing lover, but she wasn't aggressive. Sometimes, it occurred to me that I ought to demand more. When I did, she was willing. When she took another lover, during the time we spent apart, and then demonstrated her new knowledge to me, I felt remiss.

Remiss? Does this language surprise you? It does me. In the description of sexual acts, I seem to prefer elliptical language. The experience of lovemaking is barely physical, completely physical, and overwhelmingly physical, thanks to the elliptical realities that nurse and milk the physical.

Her presence absolved my mind of its own participation, that is, it shut me up. I was mentally speechless. I was mentally surrendered, and the physical act was blissful. For the most part. Her vagina farted, one time, but the gap in my bliss was momentary. Married life had prepared me for the less than goddess aspects of women, without lessening my wonder. Toward the end of our marriage, my wife and I went to see a therapist. Jeannie told the female therapist that I was sexual with her, always coming on to her physically.

The doctor looked puzzled and asked, "You have two kids, and you've been married for how long?"

"Seven years," Jeannie said.

“And you’re complaining, because he acts sexually toward you?”

I’m inclined to talk about the sex between Regina and me in a less than graphic way. I enjoy the glissade of language. It has its own accuracy. We did fuck, and I got the impression she’d have liked some more of that, but I was not much of a hard fucker. Keats said that in order to live in this world, one must have the fine point of one’s soul blunted. My efforts at blunting myself were crude and clumsy.

A more recent lover told me that the men in her life were rough, demanding, and harshly physical, including her father, and it became the norm for her, until she met me. My not being rough was a disappointment to her, and her addiction to that kind of lovemaking was a disappointment to me. I’ve been a rough lover, at times, and I thought it was fun, but it came with effort on my part. In other words, I had to feel something like anger, in order to do it.

I wanted to cherish Regina, to lie against her lovely body in pure joy. I wanted to cup her breasts in my hands as her exquisite, transcendent flesh transformed me; in something like the way the embrace of the divine transforms language to song, to prayer, and to poetry.

I’ve called the female breast transcendent flesh, because, without bones and without purpose, it simply is. Breasts have been, for me, the physical equivalent of affection. I found myself acting more gently, more tenderly, whenever breasts were given to me.

Affection has had the same effect. Neither breasts nor affection were offered to me as a child. I see now how these leaps are made, but that doesn’t diminish the effect.

Maybe, by now, you can tell my dilemma. For some reason, or for no reason, at this time in my life, I want to describe the moment of love as a simple reality that coincides with the absence of controlling thought.

I was physically in love with Regina, and her beauty made being in love with her almost unarguable among men and probably among women, too, but what I experienced with her was a transformation of the physical. It was not a conquest of form over form, of male over female; it was a kind of surrender to the gift of love in the body.

The Gift of Love

The gift of love frees the heart to its purpose,
to pump life to the myriad blood fires in the cells,
the body a constellation in a heaven grown larger,
I push back the edge of infinity.

I see her as clearly as if I'd seen no other, as if
a bone dragged out of Adam's chest and presented
to him as the full birth and generation of a parallel
solar system, not shadow planet or clone amalgam,
but twin genesis, done by the same hand, sprung
full-blown from both poles of the wide world.

She is no one I have ever known before, yet I stare,
astounded, at the inspired clay, to make a life so
known and unknown, visible texture, like new eyes
on ancient material, the whole of human history
come down to a common kiss.

Her beauty overcame the desire of my mind to control thought and feeling, and let what felt like love rise to the surface. Everyone wants to surrender themselves, in a naturally wise but unconscious attempt to be free. Surrender to God, to another, to country, to political leaders, to ideas, to work, to family, to causes, to nature, to love and to hate; all these acts of surrender are a poor imitation of real surrender, that occurs in the acceptance of who we are, in the nature of our being. Most of what we call surrender is only capitulation.

In my desire to surrender, I was captured. True surrender is freedom, but none of its imitators lead anywhere but to prison. I came close to freedom with Regina, but my surrender was incomplete and unwelcome, by her and by me.

This is the secret nature of the love song. Boy meets girl. Boy loves girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gives up the nature of love, in the failure of love's pursuit. Boy gets rich writing brokenhearted love songs, and dies with an cold and empty heart.

Je Ne Sais Quoi

My daughter once said my autobiography should be called, "Chicks and God." She had a point. I've been drawn to the presence of essential being in all its forms, and one of the forms that I'm drawn to is the openhearted amazement that occurs in the presence of a particular woman. As a man and as an artist, I've seen women in all their ways of being, from birth to death, including beauty and degradation. I've been inclined, from time to time, to try to describe what I've witnessed, but that doesn't touch the delicate fear that occurs when the heart is laid bare. I said that being with Roxanne was like two years of one-night stands. That was a joking reference to the state of mind that occurs when nothing is certain, when one lives in the moment. Sitting with a teacher in India, just being in India, was, for me, living in that same state of being without the comfort and assurance of role or idea.

All The Way

I don't see bits and pieces of those I've known, familiar hurts and pleasures in her semblance, I'm beyond definition and my poor matching words, there is no safe language to dress myself in.

I've been here before, but never in love, my sorted-out world shaken to the absolute absence of careful clothing, without comfort of role or idea, the heart a taut membrane, untaught by my experience.

This is my brain, packed with education, unable to give its learning a lesson book to compare her with, here is the soul's breath, around which everything is born, not known.

I've surrendered to the heart, beyond my memory of any image of it, my chronicled existence fades to antique paper, curious, but fragile, I'm filled to immortality, as purely real as God's gift to make us flesh.

That poem was written ten years after Regina, when I was sober and better able to describe what occurs in the heart, when it's open in the world. When I lived with her, it was every bit as true, but I didn't know my own heart as well, and I was inclined to look for sources outside myself. I never felt safe with her. This is not to say we didn't have an agreement between us. I think we both meant to be together, and we were, for a time.

I haven't mentioned my kids. At that time, they were ten and seven, and they visited the City every couple of weeks. I recall Regina being good with them, not trying to be their mother or their friend but just being who she was, and they seemed to accept her presence. My daughter, especially, really liked her. I made a crude loft for them in the back room, and they were already familiar with the cafe and the park. I'd been divorced for four years, and our routine was familiar. I was a loving father in their presence and a lousy father in all other respects. We've come to be together, better, since both kids moved to be near me.

They were a real part of my life then, and Regina was not a negative influence, but they're not part of this story. This is not an attempted autobiography but an effort to be clear about what I have called *the love of my life*. My inherent being is the true source of the love of my life, but as my being enacted itself in the world, she became the *sine qua non*, the *ne plus ultra*, and especially the *je ne sais quoi*. The *je ne sais quoi* is what this is all about. In other words, I am love itself, as are we all, but I was nuts about Regina.

No Past or Future

There were times when I was embarrassed to be seen with her. Walking down the street, with my arm around her, I felt foolish. I assumed that everyone was as much in love with her as I was, they must be thinking I was the lucky idiot who got to be with her. That feeling never went away. Toward the end, looking out the window of her apartment on Park Boulevard in Oakland, we watched a couple who were lying on the grassy hillside of a small city park. I said that the woman was being the aggressor, just like she was in our relationship. She said that wasn't true, that I was the aggressor.

Of course, she was right. I was the hapless aggressor. It's hard to play hard to get when you've already been had. This is the beauty of poetry and art. Keats could identify with the nightingale, without feeling like a sap. In poetry and in painting, I can surrender to the moment, and I can surrender to any face that the moment might have, and there is no loss to my dignity. I wish that were true in matters of love. Perhaps it's best that it isn't true. In no poem or painting have I ever surrendered to the subject matter, but to the state of being itself. Surrender to the object kills the art. Surrender to the art enlivens the object. This is a universal rule.

Toward the end, one day, walking back from lunch to her Oakland apartment, we stopped, and she said, "When I'm with you, I feel like I don't have any past or future."

"It's being in love," I said, but she wasn't content with that answer. She had other fish to fry. She was nearly twenty and eager to take on the world. I would add that being in love without a sense of past or future is the only true freedom. The world belongs to those who want the world, until or unless they realize they've apprenticed themselves to a lavish but harsh master who doesn't grant them the freedom they seek.

The Poet

What occurred to me in her presence is not what occurred to her in my presence. For a year and a half, we were a couple. Six months after I wrote the poetry satire, I performed it as a one-man show at the Folsom Bistro, a bar and cafe run by Craig and Alice and three others, including Alice's sister Tricia.

When I performed my work, I had a focus other than Regina. During rehearsal, I remember seeing her, out of the corner of my eye, talking to Kurt. I always wondered if they became lovers, but I never asked him, and I didn't want to know. She got a job working for a Montgomery Street lawyer. He had been friends with a current prime-time TV star, back when she was a model in Tennessee. His name was Dud Gunn. My take on him, second-hand, was that his name suited him. But I could see her moving into a wider world, just as I was settling into mine.

Carl Jung, who Regina was reading, describes the type of person he calls *the poet* as someone who might otherwise lead a sane and rational life, until the voice of creation speaks in him, and then he responds in a way similar to the calling of the spiritual. He might then abandon the safety and security of his ordinary life, in favor of the pursuit of his calling. The *poet* might seem insane, but his motivation was more than sane. Some lovers may respond to an inner calling, and others are driven by their neuroses or psychoses. As in all of life, many are called, but few are chosen, and nobody knows the difference.

End Game

Before she moved out, she'd already made up her mind. By then, Craig and Alice lived in a converted firehouse. Kurt lived on the top floor. I painted the huge room Craig and Alice lived in, to get the money for the first month's rent and deposit on our place on Ninth Avenue. One time, we went to their place to see the hot new show, "Saturday Night Live." It was fun, but the usual banter and real dialog, among my artist friends, was silenced by the TV.

We went to the firehouse a week before Regina left, the first time. When they were alone, Regina asked Alice, "Do you think Steve is better now than he was when we met?" Alice said, "I don't know. I haven't known either of you long enough, and I didn't know Steve before he met you."

The first time we split up, Regina moved in with Hallie, temporarily, and a boy from her modeling experience came to help her move. I did nothing to stop her or help her. It took the two of them less than an hour to collect everything. The boy was concerned I might steal something. She told him I wouldn't do that. I could hear a certain pride in her voice as she said it. After they left, I realized she'd left her cast iron ashtray on my table. I was the only one who used it. I kept it for a long time.

At first, I was OK. She came back, once, and we made love. I was ripped apart. I wanted to cling to her. I wanted to let her go. Her body was unbearably lovely. It wasn't more lovely, it was more unbearably lovely.

Then, I went into a state of mind I called brain fever. I house-sat for the owners of the Owl & Monkey, for a weekend. On that Saturday, she came back again and left me a two-page letter saying how much she missed me. We reconnected, and I moved to her small apartment in Oakland. I hesitate to tell these endgame stories, for fear that my story will end, but that hasn't happened so far. This is not a chronological story. I don't remember her, chronologically. I barely remember her, anecdotally. In a way, I remember nothing about her.

I came across a photo of a model, years later, that reminded me of her, and I clipped it out. It was irrelevant to what occurred. What occurred for me, and for all of us, is not in the description of the event, but in its essence. We humans fall in love by a lamppost, and forever after, we're fond of lampposts. It's irrelevant, but it's an adorable human characteristic. The

events of our lives, that resonate in our stories, are the ones that affect our place in the world. The events of my living with a tall, beautiful, mysterious, young woman affected my place in the world, to some degree, but what occurred in my fledgling heart was beyond the chronicling of events.

As I sat in the same room with her, night after night, month after month, I took pleasure in her presence, and I suppose she in mine, but something gave my heart pause, to open, in peace and happiness. That active peace, called love, is what has lasted, and it has no order to it.

At the last party, at Tim Gleysteen's house, I finally passed out. Then, Marion Reed, who was hopelessly in love with Chris Blaine, woke me up. She knew something she wanted me to know.

"Where is Regina, Steve? Where is she?"

I woke up, I came to, I went looking for her. I found her in bed with Chris. Chris was a man of wit, artistic skill, and a great imagination. And he was a friend. He said to me, on another occasion, needless to say, "Steve, your only problem is your love affair with the bourgeoisie."

He also said, "You don't leave the army by becoming a general, you leave the army by leaving the army." I had left the bourgeois army, but I have fond memories of my time in service.

When I burst into the room, Chris leaped up. So did Regina. I punched him, and I slapped her. Chris went to the phone and called his girlfriend, Marilee. As he was crying to Marilee how much he loved her, I lifted a chair, raised it above my head, and smashed it on the floor. Tim, the lawyer, came in and tried to calm things down. At 5 AM, Regina and I drove back to Oakland. Later, she told me she'd seen something in my eyes.

"In the middle of your rampage, you were watching your own behavior."

"Good thing, too," I said. "Otherwise, we'd all be dead."

Partners

I was thirty-five, she was eighteen, and she was my partner. Neither of us was capable of knowing such a thing, but there were signs of a bond between us, not in our personalities but in our spirits. I won't say souls, because all souls are one soul, indistinguishable and inseparable, like the water in the ocean. Spirit is the separating of the parts of the ocean into waves. We were on the same wavelength. For a very short time, in a very particular way, with no boundaries to it, we were committed to the same thing. What that was is unknown and maybe unknowable. We were waves in a common swell. When we crashed, we seemed to evaporate or return to the indistinguishable sea. She's out there now, somewhere at sea, in the air. One of the times I saw the bond between us was at a poetry reading I gave at Intersection, that first year. Among others poems, I read these.

It Was a Small Town and the Only Theft was a Blanket

I take the first taste of bourbon for the night,
like the first taste of bourbon I ever took, and it tastes
the same, I look at the pork-chop photo on the Safeway
matchbook, and she is reading Knut Hamsun, reading
Hunger, she's at Hamsun's house, he's leaning close,
straight from his once-living soul, she holds the book
in her hand, up behind the binding, her fingers over
the top, like she's his favorite niece, and he's taking
her on their favorite stroll, she holds the book, it holds
her hand, the book is thin and paper pale white,
like the old man's hand, they're walking in Cristiana,
before it became Oslo.

She has that peace on her face, like a young woman
who's being told things, not like a girl is told, not

like a woman is told, she's absorbing the story,
like the warmth of her hand warms the old man's hand,
like the thin lines of her palm touch at many places
the higher edges of small pulp in the page,
like the sensitive skin of her fingertips edges across
the rough folds of his aging hand, I tap a Winston
from the pack and pull a match from behind the
pork shop photograph on the Safeway matchbook.

What are you writing about? she asks, *You*, I answer,
and she smiles, as she and Hamsun turn the corner,
at the bushes, on the walk, near the wall, in the garden,
off the street, in Cristiana, a century ago.

What Do You Mean, You're Tired of Poetry?

She's one of those girls who gets in everywhere,
because someone falls for her and invites her along,
she ends up standing around the recording studio,
art studio, studio apartment, cocktail party,
tonight, she chose the high-priced popcorn,
without the money for it, because she knows,
and the grocer said, *Sure, for a pretty girl like you.*

I said I resented that, my empathetic identification
with the desire, with the long line, witness to the one
who steps in up front, easily granted front-row seats,
not that I wouldn't do the same in her place, but
who's in her place? I am, from time to time.

White Goddess, Jewish Princess, Rockefeller,
Hollywood Queen, Ruling Elite, Darling of the Media,
I said I felt foolish putting my arm around her and
smiling happily, anyone would do the same, who
didn't plant a knife between her identical ribs,
but in fact, she has a crooked rib cage,
blood in her veins, and a soul.

Still, she says she's tired of poetry,
and wants, expects, more for me.

More? More than poetry?

She Warms Me More Than Bourbon

I go to the store and buy a bottle of Cream of Kentucky
and a pack of Fruit-Flavor Care-Free Sugarless Gum,
now everyone has his little treat, and we're set for
the evening, she, with eyes that seem to have cried,
and I, with sunned face, that has cried, at times.

I played ball this afternoon with the Black teenagers,
who call themselves Nigger-Chink and Honky-Nigger,
double-clutching and slam-dunking their way into adulthood.

Burn him! the watchers whisper to the boy who guards me,
she stays home and wonders, as she lemon-oils the house
for the visit of her mother, why she feels like crying.

*I touch certain parts of your body with such urgency.
Your love is like a curling iron in my stomach.*

My heart is beating faster and faster, I think,
*I'm going to die, at 4:30, on a basketball court
on a Sunday afternoon, but I can't be dying,*
it feels so good, her gum is smacking and crackling
and juicing up her tongue, my bourbon is sloshing
and slurping and warming up my throat, the kid
never does burn me, he just shoots good,
anyone with skill, and love of the game,
is not to be denied.

Ne Se Voit Pas Sur Le Visage
(It Can't Be Seen On The Surface)

*I guess things are going well, if we can sit here,
with nothing to say, she says, both of us with eyes
full of grief, bursting with silence, she puts another
layer of red on her already burdened fingernails,
they gleam, she paints the undersides, and cleans
the edges with a letter opener, she writes her mother,
sending her helicopter photos of the beach, glances
wistfully at me, the talker, just as the poet, Vallejo,
warns me, and what if, after so many words,
the word itself doesn't survive?
Don't say a word.*

I can feel the next hour in the room
as if it's a sky for birds to rendezvous.

All day long, I repeat the phrase, *ne se voit pas
sur le visage*, lines from a can of French talcum
powder, as if its meaning is unknown, *toss
that talc in the air, right now, and watch it
cling to the unspoken words.*

She sits at the table mumbling about
various movies not nominated for an Oscar,
who'd give one for this pent-up drama?

Whoever finds the key
that unlocks the tongue,
unleashes the mystery of silence,
I've lost those silent years,
opening door after door,

*I wish she would speak, I think.
I will speak, I say, I will speak.*

She Lay On Me Like A Dentist's Lead Vest

She lies on my chest, like a dentist's lead vest,
while I X-ray my thoughts about the young poet
I heard read her poet's lament, she might have said,
in sum, *a heavy thing, the sense trip, it's like, scary,*

The muscles in my neck tense, each time
she enters the room, or anyone does.

An evening of intercourse ahead,
and barely a tenth of it sexual.

We clear away the deadening habits,
and unfettered life looms like a spider's web.

We pass the disputes that weed out the distrust,
and a gaping possibility wanders our rooms.

What if we had all the time and all the love?

At the home of friends, I read and talk
and assume them to be the center of possibility.

In my own house, I can't believe I'm enough,
I seem all responder, my activity frivolous,
I can't recognize the simple beauty
of presence I am inside of.

I long to be alone again, in the presence
of remarkable others, distant from my innards.

I love a woman I'm afraid to lose,
I lose her nightly, for the fact of her.

Daydreams And Suicide

She doesn't mention suicide, but it shows up
when she says she believes in nothing.

Love and death are on her mind, the one in the other,
she hasn't been living up to her stature, lately.

there is a tender fear in her eyes, as she lifts the prayer
plant from its basket and sets about to trim it, perfectly.

Those traits she finds herself taking from her
mother are the very ones she finds to criticize.

*Everyone is suicidal, she says,
but not everyone daydreams.*

She imagines a torrent of cloth in a box,
free of mildew, next to the sink,
I can smell the cloth.

When I finished reading my poems, that night, I knew a line had been crossed. I heard, later, that two of the more established poets in the audience had looked at each other, during the reading, and nodded their assent. I was welcome. I was accepted. I'd been reading for seven years, and I was well known, but that night I was accepted inside another invisible circle. I knew Regina was present, and I knew she was with me. She was the star of my reckoning, without effort or decision. When these things are true, there is no explanation and no denying. I would like to speak about this partnership in spirit from her side of it, but I can only speculate about what occurs in

anyone else's being. I believed in her, then and now, as someone blessed and cursed by her beauty, as I've been blessed and cursed by my creativity.

Flash Rain

The agitation that comes on a man in the presence of a woman blessed with remarkable beauty would never do to win the heart of one of love.

Certainly, it takes part in the stir she is part of, too familiar to her, and seldom done without, and if done without, can become cynical, or blind boredom.

Except where an original mind, by God's double blow, is thrust onto the same woman, and seeks itself, the way all flowers grow wherever they grow.

There, it becomes challenge of a higher sort, or other, or odd, or never known, or alone.

There, it dreams, and along with dreaming, sees, and is, no imagination of the excitable satisfies, flash rain never soaked the soil, or the soul.

Creativity is the equivalent in my mind's reckoning as is the presence of a stunningly beautiful young woman, and I have nothing to do with it, anymore than Regina had anything to do with the accident of her beauty. Her parents were good-looking people, as were her sisters, but her beauty could have become either transcendent or tragic. For such beauty to become transformative, only time would tell. I supported her efforts to make her way in the world, against all odds. Her gifted beauty was a guarantee of

attention but not of care. She could walk into a bar and be in Paris the next day, if she was willing, but that could make her an ornament and not a traveler. The question with anyone of remarkable qualities, is not, "Does it get my attention?" but, "Is it worth my attention?" Sometimes, the answer isn't clear for a long time.

This Accented Love

After the blow-out at the last party, after I tried to get Regina to open up about the less happy feelings in her life, I found a letter she wrote to her sister in Oregon, the one who wanted to be in Playboy's Girls of the PAC-Ten. Regina told her sister, "I did terrible things to Steve, and he still won't leave." So much for my romantic version of our spiritual partnership, I think, but spirit, like the Muse, doesn't care about personal stories, good or bad. I thought about not telling this anecdote, but the truth will set you free. If you really want to be free.

This second time, when she packed up to leave, I had no air of sweet understanding to mask my unhappiness. I was hurt and pissed. Hallie and her boyfriend came to load up her stuff. The next few weeks were lost in a morass of self-pity, self-doubt, and alcohol. Sitting with a master in India, I saw openhearted people in exquisite moments of liberation, laughter and joy. I saw the same people on the street, pushing and shoving each other to get an advantageous spot in line.

The spirit is constant, and it connects in its own eternal way, but my life is fraught with contradiction and turmoil. The challenge has been to bring my life in tune with my spirit. Regina and I had the same opportunity, as we all do, but that was then, and this is now. I was sitting in a group of people a while back, and suddenly I felt what I identified as a memory of love for Regina or for my time with her.

It was a wonderful feeling, but I felt disappointment that it was so long ago, and that it was gone. I remembered my teacher in India saying that the function of memory is a service of the mind to prepare us for what might be occurring in the present. Our minds do an instantaneous search of the past, to find a memory to match where we are now, to show us some way to deal with it.

A memory that was close to the love I was feeling right then was pulled up and out to show me a similar feeling. I was happy to remember those good feelings, knowing I was having similar feelings, at that moment, then and now. I leave the past to memory, so I can stay in the present, a very real present that memories of the past can only imitate.

This Accented Love

The ordinary plan is for all love to fail,
a life to follow of searching, regrets, loss
and despair, to name a few of the masks
the mind makes of love, here's the catch,
love cannot fail, it can only be gone away from,
this accented love is an arrow into the heart,
the arrow always aims in, toward the heart,
loss lingers at the abandoned bow.

You Touched My Arm and it was My Heart

There is a tenderness, done by flesh, unknown
by tenderest flesh, a voluptuousness that poor flesh
imitates, with her hand at my elbow, or was it
my back, I was assured of eternity.

I Miss You, No Such Thing

Missing you
is what misses you,
the pain I think I feel
when I feel your absence
is when I feel your presence
and try to hold it.

This pain is trying to hold
the glimpse of heaven I call you, is me,

whenever I believe I'm being deprived,
it is deprivation asserting its claim.

Deprived is a shadow,
unable to dance in the light,
everywhere light goes looking,
it cannot find the dark.

Fearless I Surrender

It takes only a little fear
to stay away from this love,
I am fearless, I surrender, this
is the only definition of love
that doesn't lie, just a little.

My Absent Lover

I can't long for my absent lover, my sadness
cries out for the wrong return, who would come
home to misery but misery in another form, is
despair the echo of joy, I sing in, to the heart
of the heart, where even grief awakens in
the angels the inseparable song of love.

C'est La Vie!

And now for the rest of the story. Everything I've said, so far, is all well and good, but this writing posed the question, "What does it mean to call someone the love of your life?" Over the years, the sense of unrequited love, love lost, love left, and love found, has been about occasional love. It's also been about the source of unending love in the heart of the one who loves.

My girlfriend after Regina, Emily Mercury, yelled at me on the bus, one night, "Love? You don't know the meaning of love!" There was more than a grain of truth in what she said. I had no idea what love meant, and I didn't know how to learn it.

I remembered that incident, recently, and then I remembered another. One night, Regina and I went to the Music Hall on Bush Street, in San Francisco, so I could participate in an open-mike night. There were celebrity judges, including an increasingly drunk Grace Slick, lead singer of Jefferson Airplane, and a man who was one of my heroes when I was a kid, the comedian Dick Shawn, the author and star of his stage show, "The World's Second Greatest Entertainer."

My slot kept getting pushed back later and later. I was slated to read "The Shirt That Spoke French," the poem that Chaz Kelsey said would make me famous. Dick Shawn had enough, after a couple of hours, and he got up to leave.

Regina disappeared from our table. I saw her standing, across the hall, in the back-lit doorway to the lobby. She was pleading with the comedian. He listened, and he answered her. And then he left. She had been begging him to stay and listen to my bit. He said he wished he could, but he couldn't. He was really sorry. He had to go. He had to. I thought that any man who could leave Regina behind, must have had a truly compelling reason to be somewhere else.

It was very late, when I did my piece. Grace Slick had long since stumbled off the stage. The poem didn't make me famous, but the evening endeared me to Regina forever. My dream girl, my imagined one and only, she stood up for me. She was on my side, for a short time, in real life, forever, in the even more real time of my heart.

The Shirt That Spoke French

Je suis un shirt, j'aime les pants, le belt est un tie that binds,
avec les shoes et les socks, nous faisons un pretty sight,
sans underwear, notre homme can get pretty cold dans December,
Zut alors! It's nasty quand le wind blows, je suis 70% Acrilan,
et les pants 100% Polyester, Sacre bleu! Mon sleeves sont froid,
sans le topcoat, (Ils took it off un long temps ago) ils ought to
freeze his tootsies off, mais, le guy wearing moi est en amour,
and ils doesn't care, ils hot all over, despite le rotten weather.

Ooh la la! Le skirt et le blouse are dans le back seat, already,
je guess que je et les pants will be back there, toute suite,
c'est un grande night pour l'amour, but not so good
for nous accoutrements, Quel dommage! C'est la vie!

I know the source of love, I live in its doorway, and I live alone. I don't know the meaning of love. My father said I didn't know the meaning of a dollar, either. Meaning is not my strong suit, but being is.

Last Tapes

Regina and I went to see Samuel Beckett's play, "Krapp's Last Tape." I had read Beckett, along with Keats and Rimbaud, for my orals in creative writing at San Francisco State. In the play, Krapp is an old man, once a well-known writer, who sits among the boxes of his literary output and listens to old tapes of himself talking about his lover from long ago. As we were leaving the theater, Roxanne said, "You're going to end up like that." She might have said "maybe you're going to end up like that," I don't remember.

If my personal history is anything to go by, I will soon leave this story behind and move on to the next creative work. I'll remember it fondly, from time to time, but it won't reach a wide audience, and I won't dwell on it. I had another dream of Regina, last night, or some amalgamated permutation of her in my image of her, and there was no fire between us. I suppose that means this story is at an end.

The woman I call Marion Reed in this story, called me from California, on her birthday, yesterday, and we had a friendly chat. She had some serious problems years ago, but she's doing fine, these days. I asked her about the man I call Chris Blaine. She gave me his address on the Gulf Coast in Texas, and he and I exchanged emails. He's doing well, staying out of the proverbial army. I didn't mention Regina to either of them. This is not to say I will forget her or ever stop loving her. That reality hasn't changed. Only the names are changed to protect the innocence in us all.

What's the point in telling this story? There's no point. I have no point to make, and I doubt if I've made any point in the telling. I hope not. The only value in reading anyone's story is to recognize your own story. If the writer and the reader are lucky, the story enters one's thinking and takes a place there, somewhere. It's an enjoyable visitor, and then it's gone.

There's no expectation that any visitor will leave anything behind, and if they do, it's a gift, or it's a burden to be disposed of. The best gift is delight without purpose. I hope this story has been an occasion for delight without purpose. If it resonates, it's because you are a resonating chamber. That's your gift to me as a storyteller.