

Joni

Steve Abhaya Brooks

Room 154

Put aside
the chronicles of wasted time
when you enter this room,

Here
is the full crisis of love,
where a kiss comes down on lips
like spring comes up in bloom,

As slow
as the rose unfolds, as full
as each week makes a year,
where a few ingredients
make a stew greater than
the table of elements.

Do not
bring old eyes and ears
to this occasion of mixture,

What is
born alchemic
cannot be melted down
by argument or sorted out
by formulae.

We require
a new name,
and the uses follow.

The Fighting Angel

Joni was a psychic. Her parents' best friend molested her when she was a little girl, and I think I know why he did it. He was a raggedy, burnt-out drunk, and she was pure light. She was innocence itself. A picture of her, taken in the time before he came into her bedroom, reveals her as angelic as a human can be, as angelic as a human can remain, without finally being corrupted by others.

She was what was missing in Darrel's life. He tried to reach out and take it back. He tried to steal what had been lost. Joni had what we all have, and what almost all of us lose. Joni fought to keep it, all her life. Everyone who met her saw the angel, the fighter, or both.

After we'd been together for a year, we went, along with her parents, to the man's house in Tacoma, Washington, so Joni could confront him. He was a shaky old man, by then, and when Joni told him what he'd done to her, he said, "Oh, no. That never happened. If you said it happened six months ago, you might be right. But not back then." He knew what bad shape he was in, but he couldn't imagine how bad it had always been.

Black Olives and Soft Clouds

When I met Joni, I was four months sober, for the first time in twenty-two years. I was living in the Mission Hotel, in San Francisco's Mission District. I was painting a house in Oakland with David Coleman. David was applying to enter the priesthood in a Russian Orthodox sect, and he said if he was accepted he'd give me his beautiful, nearly new Jeep. The day I first saw Joni, David had taken the day off. I was working alone. Normally, he and I would stop at a coffee place on Grand Avenue on our way to work, but that day I went to the cafe next door instead.

There was Joni. 5'4", blond, with ample breasts packed into a tight pullover. I was smitten, knocked out, in full desire. I told myself, walking back to David's Jeep, that it was OK for me to go after what I desired. That expectation hadn't seemed possible, for a long time.

I went back for lunch, and I saw her conversing with another customer. She showed herself to be a strong presence. As I passed her, on my way to the rest room, I said to her, "I think I left my heart in here, this morning," and then I said, "If you don't already have a boyfriend, I'd like to put in an application."

I found out, later, that the cook had said to her, "Did you hear that?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, are you going to do anything about it?"

She did. She gave me her number, even though she did have a boyfriend at the time. The boyfriend was not long for her world. She gave me a black olive, as a sign of something. The house I was painting was on Olive Street, and I loved black olives. I told you she was a psychic.

The words I spoke to her came out of my mouth without premeditation. I'd been writing love poems, in the month before our meeting. It was something I'd never been able to do while I was drinking. Stopping booze cleared my heart, and it began to pump with abandon and bravado, with something like its natural freedom.

Fifteen years passed, and last year, Joni died. She was one of the most energetic, vital, driven, joyful, intense, problematic people I've ever known. I've never liked the word problematic. I say, if something is a problem, just call it a problem. Problematic sounds half-assed and technical. The Problematic 8000. In this case, I can use it, because she wasn't a problem, she was problematic. She was in gear for problems. Joni was an attractive woman, but nearly everyone thought she was truly beautiful. And she was outspoken.

"I will never let anyone tell me to shut down my energy," she said.

Joni had full, beautiful breasts. While she was on vacation with a girlfriend, a Greek fisherman told her they were like soft clouds. He was right. He said he wanted to come to America and marry her. She believed him, on his boat in the Greek Isles, but he never showed up, and he never answered her letters. She still believed in his intentions, ten years later. I thought he was a romantic con man, but I understood his willingness to romance her. Joni believed in him, because it was important to her to believe in herself and her life.

Joni dyed her brown hair blond and stayed blond for the last thirty years of her life. She had lovely skin and sky blue eyes. She was also a tough cookie. A friend of mine, another poet, met her and said, "She'd kick the shit out of a dead mule."

We fought with each other in the early days. I can't remember what we fought about. When I met her, her brother had been staying with her, and he was still a drunk. She asked me about drinking, and I said I didn't drink. It was true. I didn't tell her I was an alcoholic. I'd gotten sober on my own, I wasn't attending any recovery meetings, and I knew I was done with booze, so when I said I didn't drink, it was true. She later said I had lied to her.

She was not happy that I was living in a cheap hotel, and even though I hadn't said so, when she saw me in the Jeep, she thought I owned it. She felt deceived; even as she said we were both gods and that ours was a great love.

During the four years we were together, neither of us was unfaithful with anyone else. As desirable as she was, if other men weren't afraid of her, she wouldn't have been interested in them, anyway. She was on a mission to become a force in the world. She already was, and always would be, a force in the world around her.

When I was newly sober, my time as a force in the world was on hiatus. I stopped writing shortly after we met, and I decided if I never wrote again, it was fine by me. I didn't ever want to drink again.

In the first month of our being together, I wrote the best poems I'd ever written, up to that moment in time. I felt as if I'd finally stepped in alongside John Keats, my first hero. True or not, that's how good it felt. Joni was the object of my love and my poetry. I thought she might be responsible for them both. I would come to think otherwise, eventually, as I came to better understand the nature of love and poetry.

I remember the day the poems stopped. Joni had arranged an abortion, without consulting me, and she made the occasion ripe for an

attack on me. I thought I deserved her attacks. I had been a profligate drunk. I thought I deserved whatever I got, and she gave it to me.

I went with her to the doctor, and later we performed a ceremony for our lost baby. We buried a jar with mementos in it, in *her* honor. I say *her*, because my daughter thought she was going to have a sister.

Joni and I fought. Her psychic partner in Berkeley, Katherine, called us *Apocalypse* and *Holocaust*. A man who read our horoscopes told us, "Get away from each other as fast as you can." We stayed together.

Two years later, one of her fellow psychics told her, "Joni, Steve is not your rapist. He's a good man. He's not your abuser."

After we broke up, she called me, one night, weeping, pouring out her apologies for how she had treated me. I sat on my couch in my new apartment and listened to her sing-songy, teary apology. I gripped my hands together, and I gripped the arms of the sofa, to keep from being swept away in the waves of non-specific remorse and regret.

A year after she and I split up, I was seeing a woman who gave me no grief and caused no problems. I looked at the Cascade Mountains, outside Seattle, and I thought about taking the two-day Cascades Loop, as it's called, with my new lover. It seemed like a nice idea. Then, I asked myself if I would take the same scenic drive with Joni, and my heart leaped in my chest. My lungs opened with bellows force, and I grinned.

"In a minute!" I said to myself, despite the fact that when she and I had gone on the Cascades Loop, a couple of years before, I thought it was the two worst days of my life. Such was the attraction of her presence. I loved Joni, and I never stopped loving her.

Life in the Emerald City

When we met, Joni was working with Shakti Gawain, the author of *Creative Visualizations*, as one of her close associates. We went to dinner with Shakti and her core group, at a nice restaurant on Geary in San Francisco. I asked Shakti what she did, and she told me. I was glad I didn't know who she was. I liked her, and after a time in her company, I still liked her. Years later, I had seen her awareness change and grow, unlike other popular figures, and I still liked her, but I was not one of her people.

Joni was sure that creative visualization workshops were going to conquer the world, and she would lead the charge. She was sure the world was on the verge of a *harmonic convergence*, a kind of emergence of spirit upon the earth, and that she would be in the forefront of the surging New Age wave.

I thought it was the same as everything else. I predicted it would last five years. People jump into these things with gusto, they hit the hard part of making it more than a thrill ride, on the verge of actually making it a part of their lives, and they lose interest, and move on to the next thing. I felt bad telling her the thing she believed in was going the way of all other passing passions. I was surprised to hear myself say it, but it came out of some place of knowing.

We moved to Seattle, because Joni wanted to come home. She was born in Tacoma, and her parents lived on Hood Canal, a lovely place, in full view of the Olympic Mountains. She asked me, when we were still living in San Francisco, if I was a boat person. "A boat person?" I said. She wondered if I had a love of boats, a love of the water?

I said I liked water, and boats were fine by me, but no, I wasn't a boat person. There weren't a lot of boats in Nebraska, when I was a kid, and precious little water. Joni was disappointed and confused. How could anyone not be a boat person? I was born on the hill above the Mississippi River, but the boats there were commercial barges, in my limited experience.

Even so, I was happy to move to Seattle. I'd been in San Francisco for seventeen years. It was my adult hometown. I loved it. But it had been the scene of my drinking, and my drinking had spoiled the love affair. Toward the end, I couldn't see San Francisco with the same love in my eyes. I had to bend over and look at it, upside down, to imagine it afresh. I thought it was time to go.

In my imagination, Seattle was a cabin in the woods. I was wide-eyed when we took the ferry into Seattle from her parents' house on the Peninsula, on our first visit. We glided toward the city, in early evening. The sun was setting behind us, and the skyline was spectacularly lit against a purple sky. It seemed like it was truly the Emerald City. Despite its beauty, I never fell in love with Seattle, as I had with San Francisco, but it became a good place for me to heal from all my years of abuse.

Joni originally moved down to Berkeley to go to psychic school. She had been in an automobile accident, that was not her fault, and the considerable settlement had given her the chance to fulfill her dream, to go to *HeartSong* and learn the ancillary trade of psychotherapy. She became a professional, and in the 90s, her trade flourished.

One year, she was the cover girl of Seattle Magazine's feature story on the psychics of Seattle. Psychics are to Seattle what surfers are to Honolulu, what artists are to Taos, New Mexico. I've always believed that

the occult arts were an excuse for talented, intuitive people to speak what occurred to them naturally, in their awakened consciousness. Joni lived among a loose community of new age intuitives, and some were truly gifted. Some weren't. It was not unlike the poetry community, in that regard.

I went along with Joni to her groups and gatherings, partly because I was with her, and partly because it was interesting to me. My work is intuitive in its own way. It was like watching Christian TV. I didn't care about the belief system, but at least the subject matter was richer than what was on most of the channels.

On our first date, we walked around Lake Merritt in Oakland. All I wanted to do was kiss that adorable mouth and put my hands on her sumptuous breasts. The rest of it was incidental, if intriguing, for a time.

She said to me, "Do you believe in ritual?"

I had no idea what she meant. I took the apple we were sharing, and I threw it out, into the middle of the lake.

"Yes," I said, "I believe in ritual."

In Splendid Isolation

In splendid isolation, the world opens up,
like the fashion of a time turns to space,

Oh, my, a door opens, hands over the eyes,
hard to believe anyone's proclaimed majority,
even with sun and ducks and no nosey passersby,

Too many creative types in the world,
less than zip creativity, on average,

Kiss, kiss, I love her breasts on my chest,
her kiss when she kisses me, I want to
touch every tiny muscle on her body
and her not-muscles too, beautiful blue
green eyes like blue green beautiful eyes,

I love it, she says, when you engulf me.
Damn, how great is her language,

Do you know ritual? she says as we walk
around the lake, one recent sunny day,

Watch this, I say, I would rather throw
this apple far out into the lake, than
eat it, even though it is good,

Geese have teeth, or a metatarsal ridge,
in their grabby little long mouths.

The Psychic Gypsy and the Outlaw Poet

Once, during an AA meeting, I went upstairs for coffee and ran into a friend. She told me she'd been reading a book about crisis. It seems that when a crisis occurs in a child's life before the age of seven, the child will internalize it. If it occurs after seven, he or she will externalize it. Joni's entire universe, including ghosts and spirits, good and evil, danger and safety, success and failure, love and hate, were outside herself. She lived in a phantasmological jungle. A traditional therapist, who we had both seen, said to me that Joni had no internal witness. She was unable to separate herself from what she saw. She was what she saw. She was without boundaries, and that was as threatening to her, as it was spiritually desirable.

And yet, she and I enjoyed the occurrence of parallels in our separate lives. We would get together every few years, compare notes, and discover we were sharing common experiences. We were yin and yang, inductive and deductive reasoning, internal and external realities, fullness and emptiness, noise and silence, wonder and celebration.

Joni's response to the wondrous was celebration. Mine was stillness. We seemed destined to be together and destined to be in conflict. A psychic gypsy and an outlaw poet cannot manage to be dull together.

Star Crossed Lovers

Joni wore brightly colored clothing. She dressed like a psychic. How does a psychic dress? With beads and bracelets, red lipstick, flowing scarves, and bright colors. I noticed, early on, that I dressed like a poet, long before I believed I was one. That meant that I wore conservative clothing with quirky characteristics; a nice shirt with jeans and boots.

Some poets wear hats, but usually hats are for painters. When I paint, I look to see if my clothing changes as I change genres, but I'm a poet by nature. Joni tried to get me to wear bright colors. I tried, too. Occasionally, I might wear an electric blue shirt, but that was about as far as I was willing to go. A famous art teacher from New York walked up to me outside a lecture hall in San Francisco and said, straightaway, "You're a poet, aren't you?"

"Yes I am. How could you tell?"

"I could just tell," he said.

I noticed, as I was beginning to put this story together, that the poems I was inclined to include were not necessarily the ones I wrote when I was with Joni. I used many of those in my story, *Regina*. From this distance, they seem to fit Regina better than they fit Joni, but they all fit me to a T.

When Joni learned I was living in a pay-by-the-week hotel in the Mission District in San Francisco, that I had no car, and that I was a recently sober alcoholic, she became indignant and angry and accused me, "You're not the man I thought you were."

She was right. And she wasn't the woman I thought she was, but we were committed to each other as our projected lovers. The circumstances of

our meeting seemed propitious, and we both believed in propitiation, if not propriety.

Early on, I told some people at a party, "Joni and I will concentrate on her for the first five years, and then we'll pay attention to me." I believed the first part. We separated, just before we made it to five years. What's the point of a story about two star-crossed lovers who couldn't stay together? What's the point of love at all? There is no point. There is only love. But what is love?

Ultimatum in Room 154

Joni called me from Alaska, one night. She was leading a workshop in Anchorage. She called me from the hot tub of her hosts, who seemed to be a happy couple, as far as I could tell. They came on the phone and invited me to come up for a visit. They were all naked in the hot tub. I was jealous. I had met Joni in desire, and desire was the glue that kept me close, or so I thought.

I thought I'd put up with anything to get to make love to that wonderful body, with that volatile spirit. In the first days in Room 154 in the Mission Hotel, ground floor in the back, with its own bathroom, she told me, as she burst in and began undressing, "I want you to make love to me every day."

It was a shocking declaration, and my dream was answered, but there was a telltale tone to her statement of purpose. It seemed to be her way of staying in control. She was directing me to do as she wished. There were times when I couldn't finish the task at hand. I attributed it to twenty-two years of burgundy, beer, and bourbon, but I suspected otherwise.

She often asked me to massage her feet, after a rough day, and what day is not a rough day, if you want a foot massage? I wondered when I could receive such a rough day's delight. She wasn't interested. I had good hands. I didn't mind at first. The foot bone's connected to the leg bone, and the leg bone's connected to the clouds.

Joni did yeoman duty in our lovemaking, but she was not particularly amorous or affectionate. Since I was conscious of my desire for her, I lived in desire and could scarcely imagine a thought of lovers who cherish each other in sensual complicity. My desire kept me in control, in

my own way, too. I didn't have to surrender to who or what would never surrender to me.

One of the AA banners is *POWERLESS*. I got the bumper sticker for my car, a '68 Volvo I bought for our drive to Seattle. I borrowed money from my old movie actor buddy and had it painted. Earl Scheib got the color wrong and apologized. It was better. Instead of plain blue, which I had thought I had chosen from Earl's limited palate, it came out turquoise. It looked like a beach car. I loved it.

Joni hated the word *powerless*. Powerless was what she felt as a child in a hostile, aggressive, hurtful world where she was the prize, the grab bag in the discount store of life. She didn't want to be powerless, in any sense. She wanted power, and all her occult faculties were resources for that power. Joni died of virulent cancer. She fought it with all the tools at her disposal. For two years, the cancer rose up in its inevitable power and ravaged her will and the power of all her angels.

She was powerless in the end, and I wanted to speak to her about it, but I couldn't. Her will was her way, and there's no last minute conversion, as much as we might divine it. I suspect those who turn to Jesus are more in fear than in surrender. Some surrender is an act of will. "Take me home, Jesus! Now!"

Joni had gorgeous breasts, lovely skin, beautiful eyes, and great teeth, and the cancer didn't care. Nothing outside her killed her. I had a heart attack recently, and now I know how frightening a little interior mortality can be. When I went to see her before she died, Katherine was visiting from California. There was no talk of death between us. Joni was working to defeat her abuse, and I could not deny her that.

I felt helpless. I was powerless. I could not imagine any power to save her, and I had no power to give her joy in death. A grinding physical death screams louder than I could speak. I said I loved her, and I went home.

No Cheesy Love Story

Ten years after we broke up, I was driving on the road from the copy store to the coffee house. It was a usual route for me, and it ran past Joni's house, the house she and I shared when we moved to Seattle. Occasionally, over the years, I'd stop and say hi. I passed her house and rounded the block. I met Joni and her friend Susan in Joni's red sports car.

"I just got a strong Joni vibe," I said.

"I can't talk right now," she said, "I'm on my way to the doctor. I'll talk to you, soon."

"Soon," I said.

The next time was when Susan called to tell me Joni was in the hospital. What do you say about a girl who died? You could write a cheesy love story and make a movie with Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal. I bought that book in an airport, once, just to see what all the fuss was about. I didn't think much of the book, but I cried, reading it. I cried not for the girl in the book, but for my ex-wife, Julie, who almost died of cancer.

I never cried for Joni. I don't think much of such stories. The Joni I knew never died, and the Joni who died wasn't the one I knew. I wanted to hold her, and maybe I'd cry, then. I couldn't hold Joni in death, even though we embraced every time we saw each other. I couldn't hold her in life, as much as I wanted to, as much as I dreamed it, and I dreamed it, many times.

Retelling the Dream

Six months after we separated, I took my Volvo on a seven thousand mile long trip. I called Joni from Nebraska, and she told me I'd been coming to her in her dreams. She said it as if she had nothing to do with it.

"Don't do that," I said. "Don't appropriate me like that. You have your dreams, and I'll have mine." Or words to that effect; I was still hurt by our separation. I didn't like the way she could hold me in her dreams, but not in real life.

When I was with Joni, I did inner child work, visualizations, re-birthing, horoscopes, and tarot readings, I listened to Ramtha tapes and did past life regressions, I named my power animals and had animal visions. I put a small stuffed buffalo on my dashboard, as I drove. I mentally blessed the car each day.

None of these things were completely new to me. I once wrote down my dreams for three months, describing up to seven dreams a night, every night. I stopped describing my dreams, when I realized there was nothing to be gained from reliving them.

How is this story any different? Why am I retelling these dreams? This dream telling has its own imperative. It cares little about the retelling. The retelling is driving down a highway from which I can see things differently, this time around. The person who is having this dream is not the same as the one who first had them.

During our relationship, I imagined doing a one-man show of channelers, that is, psychics who speak in others' voices, and Joni got a kick out of the idea. I'd been doing that sort of thing for years. It seemed like the next right thing to do. I'd done a show of twenty poets. Why not do a show

of twenty psychics? The difference was that even as I satirized the poets, I truly love poetry and I like poets. As for psychics, I loved one of them, and I liked several others. The psychic process seemed entirely neutral to me.

If psychic thought was like poetry, I'd have no problem with it, but it's treated as something nearly sacred, in its process, by its practitioners. Poets are aware of the sacred in poetry, but they make no claims for it being sacred in itself.

Joni couldn't read me. She was too close, she said. Katherine couldn't read me, either. I emptied my mind for my session with her, and there was nothing to read. It was then that I realized it was an intuitive art and no more mysterious than that.

When I got back from my car trip, Joni's mother had died. Joni asked me to be a pallbearer at her mother's funeral. I was glad to. I liked her parents, and I thought they liked me. Her mother had a particular air about her, as if she had never completely decided to live in this world. She seemed not fully present but not entirely absent either. It seemed that she hadn't left this life, she simply hadn't come all the way in.

Joni's dad had been a career Greyhound driver. Joni's mom worked at a hospital. They worked hard, and they saved their money. They bought a house on the water, with a mountain view, a car, a truck, a boat, an RV, for trips to Arizona in the winter, two motorcycles, two bikes, and a color TV. They thought Joni was too much to handle and impossible to understand. That particular construct was familiar in my family life, as well. We were both social oddballs, but that didn't give us solace together. Exiles miss home, even when there's no home to go home to.

Gods and Ghosts

I loved Joni's presence. I appreciate anyone who inhabits his or her presence in any real way, either physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. People with big egos take up the space of their existence with themselves. People with surrendered egos take up the space of the universe. We are present in this being in a variety of ways, to varying degrees.

Joni was physically, mentally, and emotionally present, but her spiritual self was her occupation, and it was less spiritual than it was physical, mental, and emotional. It was the occupation of her personal self, the occupation of her ego.

I'm saying this, now, for the first time. I could have an enjoyable conversation with her about the manifestations of the spiritual, as long as were speaking physically, mentally, or emotionally. In other words, she was a storyteller, even a gossip, of the invisible. She could see, hear, and read the spiritual life of those around her. She was a psychic and a therapist, and she was a very good one, especially for those who traded in the same. I have no quarrel with the physical, mental, and emotional life that is described in spiritual terminology. If you want to dance with the gods, how can I stop you, and why would I want to? We dance with each other, why not dance with spirits and demons, with gods and ghosts?

Susan said she was raised by Satan worshippers who sacrificed human babies. Susan is as sensible and lovable as anyone I know. Ramtha was a fifty-thousand-year-old warrior who spoke with an English accent. He lived before England existed, but who cares about his accent?

When I was a late-stage alcoholic, I could move coffee cups on a table simply by staring at them with a deeply disturbed mind. I could judge the character of strangers across a crowded room with accuracy. We can all do these things. Gods and ghosts seem to act like annoyed poltergeists, slamming doors and causing paintings to fall from the wall. Joni *caused me* to move out of our little house into the garage. I can only guess how she did it. I was convinced it was my idea.

I wrote a novel about growing up, and she wanted me to paint more houses and make more money. She read my cards and told me the cards said house painting was a gold mine. But, unfortunately, I was not a miner. I was willing to take a pan to the stream and collect nuggets, when the rent was due, but Joni had a taste for luxury.

On the other hand, whenever I gave a poetry reading or put on a performance piece, Joni was there, and the last time, she came with her new boyfriend. That reminds me of her last boyfriend, in Oakland, back when we met. He was a plumber. Joni convinced him to raise his rates to increase his income. He did, and he was heartbroken when Joni dumped him, unceremoniously, for me. We were staying at her cousin's house in Berkeley when he came knocking. He seemed like a good guy, flummoxed and bewildered.

Joni made decisions in her life with finality. One of her best friends was an inner-circle disciple of a female Indian guru. Joni went to see the guru with her friend and decided in a flash that the woman wasn't worth her time. That same guru apparently came to my hotel room one night and floated from ceiling corner to ceiling corner, threatening Joni's life. I looked, with all my intuitive willingness, to sense the intruder, but I was not blessed with knowledge, so to speak.

Joni and Katherine organized a workshop in Progreso, Yucatan, Mexico. I was welcome to come, if I could raise \$800. I was able to finish the apartment of a friend for \$800, the night before our departure. I was the van driver, and otherwise free as a bird.

Joni had been in Progreso years before, where she met and fell in love with a local doctor who said he was going to leave his wife and kids for her. Instead, he left her for them.

The Gulf Coast town of Progreso was small and rustic, with a town square, a couple of cafés, a couple of restaurants, and a hotel. Joni and Katherine rented two beach houses from a Canadian, and I went along, with twenty others in attendance, to expand our consciousnesses and learn psychic techniques.

I found out that chewing tobacco, my vice after alcohol, wasn't available in Mexico, so I bought Mexican Marlboros, broke them up, and chewed the tobacco. It was almost good enough. I suspected the Mexican tobacco was without additives, since it tasted better than chewing American cigarettes.

While I was driving a group to Uxmal, one weekend, Joni was back in Progreso and was nearly molested by two drunks on the beach. She ran to a local man who had been friends with Gary Cooper in the 50s, and he roused the police who rode to Joni's rescue, scouring the beach for the long-gone miscreants.

Katherine met an off-duty tour guide at Chichen Itza who invited her and her friends to meet with a Mayan priest the next weekend. We accepted the offer. I have to preface this story with a word about the constant talk of the supernatural that permeated our time in Mexico. For

instance, an incident occurred on that first weekend, when we stayed at one of the fine hotels that fringe the Chichen Itza compound.

Joni, Susan, Katherine and several other women went onto the grounds to perform a ritual of their own devising, against the park rules, of course. I was back at the hotel with two other guys, and we decided to go visit the pyramid, around midnight. It was a still night with a bright, starry sky and no wind. It was warm but not hot. The three of us stood at the base of the pyramid, close to the Mayan altar of ritual beheading. Larry and I heard a noise, a cry of sound, a howling. The other guy, Jim, didn't hear a thing. "Hey, it's your reality, man," he said, laughing at the two of us.

We were certain we'd heard something, and to me, the message of the sound was, "Get out. You're not welcome here." Larry and I agreed to head back to the hotel. I walked calmly and slowly, so as not to run. At the hotel, I was spooked. I felt the fear of a scary movie. Joni came back from her adventure, in good spirits. Ghosts were her buddies. Her friends had ghosts for buddies. They laughed at me, and I felt ridiculed.

Larry and I had stood on the plain, at the foot of the great pyramid, next to the place where they did the beheading, like a regular Sunday barbecue, and we heard something. There was no sound but the sound we heard. There were no trucks on the highway, no wild animals, no airplanes, no fun loving tricksters hiding in the shadows. At least I don't think so. Joni wouldn't do that. It wasn't her style. She wasn't a trickster. That was more my style. Joni was laughing at the novice, peeing in his proverbial pantaloons.

At the end of our stay, we went to see the Mayan priest. Oh, and in the underground cenote swimming pond, I marveled at Susan's breasts,

and Joni sensed my interest. I denied everything, but I had seen something, like cumulus clouds, big and fluffy.

Chac Mol and the Cenote

When the workshop was over, we went back to the hacienda hotel at Chichen Itza. This time, Joni was exhausted. The workshop had not gone as well as she and Katherine had hoped. Some participants fought with each other, and some were unhappy with what they'd gotten for their \$800. I didn't care much about the exercises, although I enjoyed them, and I often wandered around the town of Progreso.

One day, I heard a baby crying, and it startled me. In my two weeks in Mexico, it was the only time I heard an unhappy child. The environment was Third World basic. The people in the countryside showed a quality I called *fierce tranquility*. They were faced with natural survival on a daily basis, and it made them fierce and tranquil at the same time.

Progreso was where Joni and I agreed on the highest qualities that a person could exhibit. It was the ability to be *simple, unpretentious, and straightforward*. Our agreement made us both smile.

At Chichen Itza, we met Francisco and began our journey to the Mayan priest's house in the backcountry, near the town of Valladolid. Francisco spoke Mayan, Spanish and English, necessary because the priest spoke only Mayan. The priest had once been acclaimed by those who had unearthed the site at Chichen Itza, for National Geographic Magazine, in the Fifties. The archaeologists had wanted to do a story about him, but he said no. He wasn't interested in the publicity.

In Valladolid, we stopped for candles and a bottle of wine as an offering for the priest. We began our back road drive into the night in our rented VW bug with Francisco beside me and Joni and Katherine in the back seat. We drove and drove on a bumpy, winding, rough, dirt road

between thick walls of growth that rose no more than fifteen feet in the air. Above that, was a void of black sky that mimicked the road and the dark earth that wasn't caught in the bouncing cones of light from the car.

After what seemed like an hour, driving in loops and circles, Francisco said we were there. We stopped at a wide place in the road,. We got out of the car and moved on foot in the pitch dark, holding lit candles for guidance. We eventually found two huts in the dark, amid squealing and barking noises, growling and grunting, the chirping of birds, none visible to the eye. The priest's wife told Francisco her husband was nearby, conducting a ceremony for the people gathered in the community center.

We made our way back to the car and drove another two hundred yards to an open field, in total darkness, except for the headlights of the VW. There were no bright stars or full moon, and there was no electricity in the area, so there were no electric lights. When we got out of the car, people began to appear around us, like phantoms from the shadows, when shadow was all there was. Mostly children, they seemed gently curious about us. A man led Francisco to the chapel, where the priest had been conducting services the whole day for the town festival.

After a few words with Francisco, the priest agreed to meet with us, back at his home. He was a small man with a sleek, bony face, as beautiful as a carved icon. From then on, we were honored guests, and I felt like Quetzalcoatl among the locals, who surged in small groups to our side, talking quietly among themselves and smiling at me, the giant white man. They were at peace among themselves, and we were welcome.

We walked to the car, drove the short distance back to the path to the priest's house, walked to the house, found a small hut, thatched together with poles, sticks and branches, with crude benches inside, and an altar

with candles and pictures of Catholic saints, a picture of an archer and a deer, and a cross. The priest was a traditional Mayan who incorporated characteristics of the Catholic Church into his practice.

The priest came along after us, and although he was tired, and he'd already drunk wine in earlier ceremonies, he received the bottle from Francisco, for use in the ceremony that he would conduct with us. Francisco asked me to go back to the car and get the corkscrew. He'd left it behind, and he couldn't open the bottle without it.

I left for the car. I knew the direction, vaguely, and I knew it was only a few hundred feet away, but when I stepped onto the hard-packed yard of the small compound, I was at a loss. With my candle in hand, I stepped out into the thickest darkness I could imagine. I entered a small corral for pigs and turned back. The night was full of noises, and none of them were comforting or reassuring.

Somehow, I found the car, the corkscrew, and I turned back toward the house. I was as lost as before. It became a rite of passage. I trusted my instincts and made my way back. As simple as it would have been to a local, it felt miraculous to me.

The priest drank the wine, as part of his ritual blessing. He spiritually cleansed us with leafy branches. He spoke only Mayan. Francisco translated his words into Spanish, and Katherine translated his Spanish to English. Still, I understood very little. It didn't matter. I loved every minute of it. At the end of the ceremony, we moved across the open yard to the small house where the priest lived, with his wife and one grinning teenage daughter. She hid shyly behind a pole and watched us. We sat on benches and hammocks and spoke a hodgepodge of English, Spanish, and Mayan.

Francisco told me, "He likes you."

"I like him," I said.

I grinned at the descendent of Chac Mol, the Mayan god. He grinned at me. It was great fun, enriched by the heartfelt spirituality. He was a little tipsy from the wine, but he was also clear and direct. He reassured Katherine that she would recover from her recent miscarriage. She was grateful for his ministrations. His wife invited Katherine into another room and performed a healing on her.

Joni was mostly silent. On the drive back to the hotel, she was glum. At the hotel, she flew into a rage. The priest had graciously blessed Joni and me. It felt like he'd married us, in some sweet way, not quite formally but with gentle authority. Joni was nothing but angry. The two weeks, leading a workshop, had worn her out. The next day she was exhausted, and the day after that, we flew home from Cancun.

For me, the trip to see the Mayan priest was stirring and fulfilling. Joni never spoke of it. I never fully understood her anger, and most people never saw it. I believe she felt safe enough in my presence to let out some old pain, but sometimes expressing pain is not healing of its source. I have no way of knowing if she was made better by her emotional release, but we were both coming to terms with long-held realities, and our relationship became a kind of ongoing workshop.

Often, in the early days, in San Francisco, she had gone to an Incest Survivors meeting, and I'd go down the hall to an AA meeting. I'd been to AA in the two years before I met Joni, but I didn't connected with it. She insisted that we go to meetings, and that opened the door for me, again, and I finally walked through.

Some of the cat and dog fighting we did with each other gave us a way to begin to break out of our patterns of repression. We laughed about it over the years, and after we stopped living together, we stopped arguing completely.

Brandy Beach

When I lived in the Mission Hotel, my old friend, Paul Vane, lived on the second floor, and my son lived there for a while, too. Paul and I had been poet drunks together, but he actively supported my sobriety. My son was disappointed, at first. When he turned eighteen, he moved to the city, planning on drinking with his old man. Two months later, I quit, and three years later, he did too. I wasn't much of a drinking companion for him.

Joni's sister, Linda, was visiting from Santa Fe, and Joni brought her along on our first date in The City. I asked Paul to be there, too. Neither Joni nor I planned the coincidence, and it was out of character for both of us to want a chaperone. Paul and Linda met and became lovers. They moved to Santa Fe, where Paul had lived, before, and Joni and I talked about joining them, but she wanted to go to Seattle. Paul and Linda lasted a couple of years, and they never argued about anything, as far as I know. At least, I never heard.

We went to Seattle for a couple of weeks, came back to San Francisco, moved in with Katherine, in Marin County, and when their mutual friend, Marilyn, an acupuncturist, went to China to study, we sublet her house in Berkeley. While we were living there, I was introduced to a woman who came to see Marilyn's partner, who was still there working, in Marilyn's absence. We spoke quietly and briefly, in the waiting room at the front of the office/house.

Later, she called to ask if I'd be willing to play a character based on the notorious San Francisco evangelist, Jim Jones, in her play about the Jonestown massacre and its prelude. I took the part and went on stage at Merritt College in Oakland, playing the charismatic, homicidal/suicidal

preacher. In rehearsal, on the afternoon of the first performance, I slipped and fell against a desk and split my ear open. I did the first performance, spewing the black bile that had accumulated in my own heart, over the years, in the character of a sociopathic preacher. The next day, I went to the hospital and had stitches in my ear. That night, emptied of my own personal bile, I had to act the part, without the personal catharsis to feed my performance. Joni thought the second performance was better than the first.

Joni and my son, Jackson, sat in the audience of both performances. They liked each other. Nearly everyone liked Joni, but while we were in Berkeley, two of her oldest friends turned on her and broke off relations with her. Something had happened between them that I never heard about. Joni threw a birthday party for me in that house and invited some of my oldest friends from San Francisco. One friend took me aside and said, "Steve, hang onto this one. She's terrific."

When we were living in Berkeley, Joni said she wanted to get a dog. She found a beautiful golden retriever at the Oakland pound, but that week, she was ill, and it fell to me to get the dog. I wasn't eager to take on a pet. The pound required us to have a fenced-in yard. I hastily built a fence in Marilyn's backyard, but the inspector never came to check it out. I got the dog, anyway. I took Brandy to dog education classes in Berkeley, and we both loved our new education.

Joni named her Brandy, which I thought was ironic, given my long and recent history as a boozehound. Brandy came with us to Seattle. She was a loving friend, until she died, just before Joni did. There was a small patch of shoreline half a block from our house on Lake Union. We called it Brandy Beach. Brandy walked at heel with me, and fetched sticks in the

lake, for as long as I was willing to throw them. Later, we got a cat I called Blacky. He was a black cat, and my fertile, razor sharp imagination leaped to the conjunction of his color and his name.

Playing the Goddess

Before I met Joni, while I was looking at some other woman, I wrote this poem to Joni's namesake, Joan of Arc, the heroine who burst into flame. Of course, I'm projecting in this poem, and when I met Joni, I thought I might have been prophetic. Maybe I was being a little bit prophetic, and maybe I was doing a little projecting.

Joan of Arc Reading a Book

You are, or you're very close to being,
a woman, and not the poster woman
at the barricades, held out in front
of the battered and budding souls
of women, that certainly grow in the fray,
and not representing all those who cannot
or will not undertake the necessary
revolution of each one alone,

Life is rife for all of us, from starved to majestic,
from denied to realized, and no amount of battling
by proxy, or in phalanx, in absentia, or in rage,
substitutes for, or accomplishes, the simply done,

How simple to say and unsimple to do,
but the doing stays quiet in the heart,
with mind for truck, and the soul,
whose flag we carry, survives in trust,

And when the generals say,
"Where are you in the war?"
you can say, 'I am over here,
winning it.'

I wrote this next poem after the propitious meeting in the Oakland café, that fateful morning. High hopes and high fears = high drama.

Paul's Description of Joni's Night

Women can smell you, they
can smell another woman on you,
the lingering stamp of approval,
and in its absence, can smell that, too,
so she wasn't home when I called,
after our fateful lunchtime encounter,

My friend told me how excited
she'd probably been that I called,
how miserable she was that she wasn't
there to answer, how breathless she was
in her restless, sensual dream of love,

In sweet detail, he painted my new Juliet,
moonbathing in delicious anticipation, and
I saw her changing the locks, the phone, her
residence, her name, her place of business,

I saw her enlisting in the Sisterhood of Women
Who Have Lost the Scent, or else, she was one
who has that other sense, an acute awareness
of the man apart, undrenched by popularity,
known only to the woman apart, the one with
flared nostrils, and eyes that can see the receiver
rocking in its cradle, from ten miles up.

This next poem came after I visited Joni's room in Oakland, for the first time.

Color Me Beautiful

Some women are weird, man, with rooms full of drippy, dreamy shit, cuddly animals, hypnotic colors, soothing language, tales of smooth sailing, baroque, rococo, semi-gothic bathrooms, cascading imagery, pop-top-selling novels, pregnant cats, furniture that looks like plants that never looked like furniture, families of creatures not found in nature, now living in cupboards, closets like dreamland interiors gone to seed,

And real lives like buckboard rides, time spent exposed to the back alley, underbelly of cream-colored insanity, histories of magic gone rancid and cancer-riddled fantasies, not a hard edge in the place, not a splintered surface apparent, but inescapable secrets of knives twisted in the heart and flesh flayed, organs torn, memories of dreams, but not a dream within the callused, heavily oiled finger-grasp of remembrance, no imagined joy in sight, but pictures of it everywhere.

True beauty is never pillowed, and true love can live in a cardboard box under the El, truth seeks out the mesa and finds it lush, and joy is a bird that needs only an open window to alight on the sill.

The reference to cancer seemed odd, at the time I wrote it. There were many moments of love and delight with Joni, but my romantic belief in the power of love seems a bit over the top. I never lived in a cardboard box, but I experienced enough debilitating distress to know that it's like a toothache, a backache, or a thorn in the foot. When these things are screaming, true love doesn't have a chance. At the time, I thought I was in a state of true love, and I hoped it would carry the day.

When I wrote this next poem, addressed to Death, I thought it too strange. Neither she nor I was in any danger of dying. We were too young and too strong. Now it seems mildly prophetic, and I'm glad that Death did grant us our time together.

The Four Handed Table

I have before me that thing everyone speculates about,
the root of entertainments, the source of unnamed anxieties,
experienced in partial agonies; the icon of the heart's integument,
the loss of one in whom the sun rises and sets, what if the sun
goes out, what if Apollo throws down the reins?

I've mortgaged my life, willingly, without recourse, I've cast my
bread on the waters, my heart has opened and been fed, new blood
is coursing the body of my life, I cannot return to the diet of lesser days,
I cannot live on aspiration's inspiration, the dreamed of, the waited for,
the satisfactory absence, I look at this woman, and everything I am is
welcome, I look at this woman, and everything she is, is welcome, wanted,
needed, desired, known, and unknown; my curiosity is global, universal.

Death, grant us this day, stay your hand, leave us for a time altogether,
we will not disrespect you, you are resident, be companion, not intruder,
life lives here, you know each other, the integrity is inviolate, Death,
you have your chair at our four-handed table, leave us the table.

I met Joni when I was entering a new life. My life had been saved. I wasn't dying. My health was coming back, and my heart was open. I began to write new poems, after several dark and unhappy years. Joni was playing the role of a goddess in her own life. She was playing the goddess in my life. I didn't believe she was a goddess, but she was close enough for me to believe she matched the joy I felt in my reborn heart.

I felt as if my life had turned a corner, into the open, and she and I were together, in living a new way. She was as much a social outsider as I was, and that was enough for me to believe in the possibilities.

One Man's House

I've stopped describing my life as if it's
in common with the common human mind,
I've crossed a line I didn't draw, a demarcation
made by the stubborn lot of people who are content
with discontent, satisfied with dissatisfaction, and
bored in such a way that it's become a way of life,

Praising the realities with wit and bright images,
I might have been made as rich as Rockefeller,
but not without a little effort, I'm here, instead,
teasing the waters where only a few swim,

I made the effort, but effort's a funny word,
when it's merely a hike in the mountains,
a hard winter's survival, and then the vista
of vast land and sea, an occasional footprint
in the sand, I suppose I look the same.

I didn't know what I was saying when I wrote that poem. Paul and I talked about it. We believed the life we led, the sacrifices we had made, and the determination we both felt, had given us credentials to believe we had *done the work*. Joni used the same words. She said she had *done the work*. She was angry with me that my version didn't match hers, and neither of us matched the work that was yet to be done. We were both in recovery, and recovery takes five years, if it takes a day.

The American Café

I wrote these next poems in the time before I met Joni, but they set the time for her arrival. In those days, I didn't appreciate the sense that being in poetry and being in love were the same, and that everything that came within one's open being could be called grace, poetry, or love.

My New Room

My new room looks far too much like my room,
it's a fine room, clean, attractive, comfortable,
well-outfitted, cared for, efficient, intelligent,
stimulating in the images and ideas, peaceful,
productive, resourceful, paid for, and available,

I'm not able to make it more than I can make myself
by myself, what's lacking is an *other* with all the same
qualities, not in duplicate or redundancy, but in alchemy.

The Surreal Landscape

Everything looks like something else, but in fact,
everything is what it is and not a metaphor for us
to decipher or a simile to carry us like a bobsled
downhill, or on to victory, like flying across
fallen bodies to score a touchdown,

Neither is it a fixed mark, this life, a poem writ on water,
it is ours to dance with death, until it unites us, and never
the twain shall meet, unless it be on a river of realization
that connects between neurons in response to experience,
that old innocence, twine of life, in and out of time,

I love you means you are the tree I water that I
depend on for the greening of the leaves that I am.

No Woman

No woman has ever understood the truth,
grown of its own necessity, who didn't stop it
with birthing or submission to a life of belonging,

And every man who understood it either made
gods to worship, or divined himself, or turned
to drugs or booze, or if lucky as rain at the
right time, these two found the other,

A man and a woman, understanding of truth,
are like the original dream, half in and half out
of paradise, they give birth to all others,
they find all others in themselves,
they bloom in the sun.

Running on God

I'm tired without someone to love,
running on God, and it ain't enough,
seeing God in everything, everyone,
all action, light, and sun,

Lying in the back of a pickup truck on I-580,
watching a hawk lying on the wind in the hills,
scratching a cute dog, stance like a young
deer, face like a wise, sad, old man, loving
my work, friends, faces, ideas, memories,

Lying on time like a hawk, circling, no fear,
no hatred, my eyes on tiny creature details,

The hawk is love of the air,
the hawk is love in the air,

I look at my hands, conscious of the love in them,
I am love in them, I am all the things I say, and I am
tired, without someone to love, strong as a young deer,
face like a wise, sad, old man, circling the details,
running on God, light, and sun, running alone.

I thought Joni had such a face, such strength, such a life.

An American Poem

From where I sit, everything I see is American;
American walls, American paint, American people,

A couple of American cops drinking American coffee;
how does a man with a gun appreciate cheese cake,
what does it mean to an American to be an American?

American music, American chairs, American talk,
a light American rain is falling on the American street,

The lights of the American cars are shining in the American night,
an American stands holding an American umbrella, as she waits
for the American light to change to American green, does one
become American, when one is already American?

The American cafe is nearly empty, as the American patrons
head for their American homes to eat their American dinners,
everything is American; this is an American poem.

I wrote those poems, and then I met Joni. There's no way to know what goes on between two people. As soon as you're there to see them, the dynamic is changed. Something occurred between me and Joni that would not otherwise occur.

One of the advantages of a relationship is that it does what Charles Bukowski credits booze with doing. *It makes things happen.* Things happen that wouldn't happen without it. Or they would happen in some other way. A relationship is a crucible of the best and the worst of human attachment and an opportunity for the open liberation of love itself.

My Kind of Woman

At the memorial for Joni, I was grinning broadly at all the people I hadn't seen for ten years, and I felt foolish. I wanted to proclaim something. I wanted to say how confounding Joni was; how she was not the goddess everyone thought she was. I wanted to read the poems I'd written when she and I were together, but I was not asked. I thought some moment might occur when I could speak the truth from my heart, whatever it might be.

I stood with Anita, the first friend of Joni's I met in Seattle, and we watched the testimonials. One of Joni's most insistent psychic friends stepped into the center of the fifty people or so who gathered on the grassy hillside at Joni's dad's house, on the hill above the water by the mountains.

"Joni is here," he said confidently. "I've spoken with her, and she's very happy you are all here with her."

I wanted to excoriate him, to contradict his divine imagination, but what did I expect? I wasn't part of her world. I wasn't one of Joni's people. In death, none of us is one of anyone's people. In death, we dissolve into the dissolution of our relationships. Even so, in that moment of her memorial, I wanted to embrace her in a way I couldn't imagine. We fall in love in a cafe in Oakland with a lovely, dynamic, frenetic ball of fire and from then on, olives have significance. We look for the names of love, and all we get are the names of things.

The day I fell in love with Joni, I overheard a conversation she was having. Someone said she'd seen Joni running around the lake, talking to herself as she ran. "Yeah," she said, "that's what I do. Run and run and rant and rave." "My kind of woman," I thought. My fate was sealed.

In Her Presence

The Challenge of Wonder

I cannot love you too much, my backward love
falls far short of you, any mortal purpose fades,
this close to the ungraspable universe, you are
beyond definition and my poor matching words,
there's no safe language to dress you in,

You are a window at the peak of Mt. Olympus,
beyond which the gods dance, the casement
describes the limits of any comparison, and yet
how fine have inspired hands designed the shape
of your opening to the pantheon beyond.

Joni was a goddess and a consternation. None of us is God, and all of us are nothing but God. Joni was someone in whom I saw the presence of the eternal and the limits of being human. There's no human power to invoke the essence of the divine. One can only surrender to it.

Joni's presence captivated those of us who were willing to believe that her presence had more than personal significance. She was more than an overweening ego. She had the presence of being itself. The mystery of creation that manifests itself in my poetry is also not mine to claim or mine to master. I can't give any credit to Joni or myself for the presence of the divine in this life. Her love of the eternal mysteries, in the seen and unseen forms of this life, opened the door for others to fall into the same love that was a gift to her and a gift to those of us who knew her.

I see now how I've failed to capture her essence or even her personality, as a goddess, psychic, friend, or lover, and I've spent most of

my time in this writing speaking of my reaction to *her* presence in *my* life; even more particularly to *my* presence in *her* life. I imagine that's not an uncommon reaction, among those of us who thought we knew her. Joni, for all her interest in the unseen, was not introspective, and she was not revealing of her nature, except in the revelation of her energy.

Joni lived in and for her energy, and her energy was grounded in what she thought of as the spiritual. She was so intent on practicing the presence of spirit in her life, she became as elusive as the spiritual is, especially to anyone who thinks it resides in form, somewhere inside or outside who we are.

Joni never seemed at peace, despite her apparent joy, and the volatility of her joy was captivating. She was a light turned on in a room, and when the light was turned out, one wondered what the nature of light was and where it goes when it's gone. It goes nowhere, of course, but I loved the presence of light that was called by her name. Joni was a presence among others. She was a presence in her own sense of herself. Presence has no characteristics, but we give it character when we see someone as alive in their presence as Joni was. She was the occasion for the recognition of presence, when she wasn't being tormented by her humanity.

Joni was tormented by her belief in the shapes of spirit, the forms of being, and the body of her presence. I believe she thought she could be freed in her body to be a goddess in the flesh, as she had once been manifestly innocent in her child heart, but the body betrayed her, as it body betrays us all. Her body was molested by man and disease, just as it was desired and loved.

Joni has *come to me in my dreams*, over the years, but I know it's not she who appears to me, but my love for her, which remains in that place where neither of us has any shape or form to be remembered, the very realm of spirit we both, in our own way, were intent on coming to know.

Joni never responded to my poetry, even the poems that were ostensibly about her. I remember her delight and her enthusiasm, I remember her anger, and I remember how happy her friends and clients were, after spending any amount of time with her.

In my story of my time with her, I feel a bit like the plumber who loved her, before me. He was bewildered by what had just happened to him. She'd come and gone in his life, like a lightening flash that changed his sense of something, and even that, he couldn't name.