

14. Melancholic Sister

*Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

Yet again it must be said that this particular consciousness of time as mortal affliction, as bringing death not just at the end of a life but along its whole course, as bringing it not just in the form of one grand finale but as a series of endpoints in imbricated and vastly diverse processes of dissolution, was both a marginal and drawn-out affair in my life. It consequently left me room for celebrating my youth even when it was on the wane and thinking myself, due to my good health, strength, and overall well-being, an excellent candidate for resisting the worst effects of time. If not quite gripped by the not-so-uncommon illusion of remaining the same and unchanging over the years while others, poor unfortunates, took a turn for the worse, then surely I was involved in some similar fantasy. In truth I was happy to remove myself from the common order of things and imagine that I stood like an oak tree in the face of time's withering blasts.

Not to be stricken but to watch others being stricken by time: was this my illusion, my entertainment, my sense of superiority, my compensation for being sexually frustrated, my morbidity as a heightened or degraded form of curiosity? Were the times that, as an adult, I watched a person struggle and die much different from the times that, as a child, I watched an insect in its death throes? How in the name of humaneness could I answer no to this question especially if it were a case of my mother's and sister's dying? How in the name of honesty, in the name of recognizing what is not particularly humane either in myself or others, could I answer yes?

Two ideals at loggerheads, humaneness and honesty, with one worth no more than the other and neither worth anything without the other. Yet I personally gravitated towards the second and, given my awareness of this, I feel an obligation to take it into account. To take into account what is normally left out by philosophers but certainly not by poets: the inhumane as it stealthily registers in one's thoughts and feelings.

To take it into account and consider it but not to take it beyond a certain point or measure. For I was humanely inhumane like most others and did not make a show of my less-than humaneness. To take it into account in the way of taking both sides into account – this is more the thing I have to do than justify being less than humane.

What is often ugly, unsettling, and distasteful in life has this strange

character of allowing itself to be beautifully metamorphosed as well-told truth. As the meticulous and many-sided account of the particular that, however poor and humble, however debased and wretched, however violent and unfeeling, is somehow enveloped in – I won't say invested by – a barely expressible grandeur. It is this with which we, as readers, identify and certainly not the pettiness of this or that element or what may even take up the foreground as unseemly, repulsive, and detestable behaviour. And what does this mean if not that, in doing this, we follow the path of the poet who, with a reflective and retrospective effort of unusual reach and convergence, reestablishes contact with the sun's glory in even the things that have most appalled and upset him?

Sharon's Story: Part I

I am summoned from the shades by a brother who, if I hadn't got over some of my anger and bitterness, I would've been loathe to give over my spirit to. Independence has always been a marked trait of mine and therefore I don't relish the thought of his memory and imagination substituting themselves for what I actually was. There is also another matter that hinders the smooth passage and negotiation of myself onto these pages. Again I say it's a good thing I've gotten over some of my anger and bitterness and am no longer thinking and feeling the way I was some weeks before my death. Then I considered his disdain for me as a supposedly weaker person a form of abuse as well as his singular lack of sympathy.

I suppose I'm supposed to keep on the track of defining his character by bringing into its proximity my own. Of course it's his ego that's in operation here and not mine. Ego is perhaps what distinguished us most: mine was – I can say it now – infected. It was like a balloon that a pinprick could deflate and render null and void. But if it hadn't been this way, if it hadn't been ruptured at so young and tender an age, then God only knows but it might've surpassed his. It might've succeeded in some of the very areas he most desired to succeed in or at least in areas close to these. And if this had been the case, if it had shone so brightly in the arts as in the sciences (and there were many indications of this even in my most delicate and abject state), then perhaps I would've also succeeded in, I dare to say, rupturing his ego.

Well, if I'm to have room for my own sort of analysis, let me take it from the point of claiming that life was fair to me and fair for me up to a certain point and no further. At the tender age of nine I no longer had a father in my life and, as I see it now, I went into a permanent state of mourning. My

attachment to life itself was fundamentally weakened in a way that unsympathetic people ascribe to a lack of character. It's as if one were gored by a bull in a life-and-death struggle and then, while lying bloodied and helpless in the arena, jeered at for not having put on a good show.

I guess I've got over some of my anger and bitterness but not all. How would it have been possible to get over all of my anger and bitterness when these supposedly negative traits defined my character as a "sick" person? It's easy enough, especially when you're a man, especially when you haven't gone through all that I did, to get angry and find it invigorating and even healthful. It's easy enough to walk away from resentment when you feel like a bull inside and not the gored person who's jeered at for not carrying himself around like a healthy person. It's easy to think that anger and resentment should be washed away with a better attitude when a "better attitude" is all one's ever known in one's life. Oh, it's so easy for the strong to be strong and assign it all to themselves and not to luck, not to the difference between that one mortal strike that comes before one has even had the chance to grow strong and the thousand strikes that come after and, as usually happens, add to one's honour and ego-satisfaction. Those charges by the bull, if I can put it this way, that come after one has been fully armed, trained, and prepared to enter the arena and be, as I most definitely was not, the hero to oneself even if one happens to go down.

My brother was the lucky one and I was not. He shed his childhood like an old skin too tight for him while I had mine ripped off prematurely. It's strange to think how little anyone thought of this, how it was assumed that, because it was irreparable on the level of event, it was surmountable on the level of right attitude and willpower. The damage to myself as a child was unconsciously minimized by all, including myself, and so I was left to spend the rest of my life feeling guilty – consciously or otherwise – for trying to "maximize" it.

Oh, if people only could've seen what I accomplished! If only they could've seen how much willpower and right attitude I put into effect to accomplish what I did. To win the honours that did accrue to me in my short life. At fourteen I was already a depressive with a world-weary attitude. And yet such was my courage and determination that I overcame all this, overcame my anorexia, overcame my father's coming back into my life, overcame my having to go through an abortion, overcame other problems psychological, physical, marital, and emotional – overcame all this and won highest honours year after year in high school, in university, and even later towards the end.

But none of them saw it or, if they did, it was overshadowed by what they saw as the person who seemingly faltered for no good reason. Who was no more afflicted and even a lot less afflicted than many others who picked themselves up by the bootstraps and got on with life. The internal haemorrhaging that had been going on ever since I'd been ripped out of my childhood and prematurely exposed to the world went without a diagnosis and so without recognition.

I was a depressive: that was the diagnosis. From the age of twenty-five on. Everything was reduced to chemical imbalances and I accepted this. I accepted the idea that I'd eventually get better over time, that the drugs would pull me out of it, that I'd live long enough to see my children grow up and become responsible adults. I accepted all this and had this sort of faith I fanned over and over again. In friends, in family, in my husband, in science, in medicine, indeed, in life itself. Truly I went for a long time wanting to get better – believing in it. To think how long I went with this belief despite recurring bouts of disbelief so strong they completely annulled all my good intentions.

Where I'm the artful assessor of my own egoism, afflicting it in the wilful, calculating, and even self-gratifying way of the truth-teller; where I can conjure up a different set of circumstances that might have ruined this course or made it self-destructive; where I can strip myself of the habitual belief that I'm responsible for it, for its being, to use Nietzsche's words, one of those human experiments that turns out well (as opposed to countless others that fail); where I can do all this without foregoing a certain self-enlargement that, in the final analysis, is *not* something to afflict myself with; where, finally, I go beyond the merely personal or grossly egoistic and towards a state of perfection more commonly sought than realized – this is where I find her.

Sharon's Story: Part II

There was a time I would've reacted harshly to anyone who was trying to pluck out the heart of my mystery. Who presumed to think they knew me better than myself or had insights into my affliction more helpful than – so it went for a long time – certain presumed experts and doctors. After all, wasn't I one who was caught up in the treachery of the world at a very young age? Who existentially and I dare say even intellectually took it on when others, full of hopes and dreams and everything else that's youthful and naive, lived happily? Wasn't I one who, while still in my teenage years, could stare directly into the abyss, into the meaninglessness of the world?

Who saw clearly what was written deep down in it? And didn't I know then, at some point, that I had to effect a sea change in my way of thinking? To turn away from the arts and towards the sciences? To get rid of the quasi-religious thoughts that, instead of being uplifting, were like a metaphysical protest? And then to turn towards a sort of earthly salvation, an earthly happiness? What did this mean other than to turn towards the common, the normal, the everyday, the routine? For this was where I had the best, indeed, the only chance of avoiding the voluptuous desire not to go out of the world piece by piece.

But as it turned out, I avoided neither one nor the other. Neither going out of the world piece by piece nor the voluptuous desire not to. Fifteen years of adult living wore away at me like fifty another. Not because my physical being, although sadly abused, had broken down. But because the will to struggle courageously on, despite repeated collapses, repeated revivals as anger and energy and protest and I dare say love, finally gave way to such an indescribable fatigue (not that I hadn't already experienced this fatigue but now it was the fatigue of having experienced it so many times) that I never wanted to see the light of the world again.

There was much that was messy in the way I encountered my fragile brilliant sister who, as a child, I was sexually drawn to and who later, as an adult, I was both intrigued and repulsed by.

Sharon's Story: Part III

He broke into my childhood not by initiating me into sex but into a strange sense of complicity, secretiveness, and tingling sensations. It didn't last long enough to be a scarring thing and later, when he started it again – I mean after we had settled in Winnipeg – it didn't take too long before I realized it was wrong. I finally rejected his advances. I didn't think his argument about brother-sister incest in ancient Egypt a very good reason for letting him carry on as he was. Most of it was rather harmless but only because I put a stop to it before it ever went on to another stage.

The next person who touched me intimately, many years later, was my first boyfriend. We were both second-year university students. He who was my oldest brother had returned home about this time. He was hard, unschooled, ruffian-like, and fearless. The prodigal son, it seemed, who would make good one way or another.

It would be wrong to say I didn't think highly of him. I told him as much on

a particular occasion that calls for a revelation of sorts. It's about something I never breathed a word to anyone. However, if I'm here not simply as a shadow of myself and truth-telling is the subject along with or as part of my character and its similarity to his, then I'll show quickly enough the kind of person I was. Truly, I never stood in need of lessons from anyone to know what it is to be honest and truthful.

It was in the basement of our house on Glenlawn Crescent in Winnipeg. The two of us happened to be alone there one evening and feeling intimate as brother and sister. I remember I said something to him that was extremely frank, flattering, and out-of-character all at once. I said something to the effect that he was the image – I think it went so far – of all that I admired and respected in a man. Perhaps this over-exuberance, this outpouring on my part had something to do with comparing him to my boyfriend of the time. Ido was bright and thoughtful but he also had the habit of looking down on people. At the same time he showed himself to be rather pusillanimous. I mean to say that, if strongly challenged, he would invariably back down. In any event, this particular evening with my oldest brother in the basement of our house on Glenlawn Crescent was a rare thing for me because I didn't feel him as a brother. If he'd happened to be a little warmer, a little more tender, a little smoother, a little less truly himself in other words, it's possible he would've done something I wouldn't have been able to call abuse.

To be sure, I have never felt myself like a bird with a broken wing. I naturally interpret this state of affairs as one of being lucky in life but also as one of never having *allowed* myself to feel so. It is this last part that looms up large and cuts off sympathy at a certain point. There is all this help and support the person is getting and you feel at some point it should compensate for the bad breaks they have had. Especially when it drags on and on over the years and every sort of treatment is tried and the person flies well and high only to keep crashing. Yes, it is this repeated crashing like a bird into a window that does it. You end up blaming the bird – just as you end up blaming the person – for not having the sense to fly elsewhere.

Sharon's Story: Part IV

I was planted in good soil in Chambly and grew up straight and smart and shining and giggly all at once. A home in the fifties that, though it didn't allow me to think that boys and girls or men and women were equal in their power to conquer the world, didn't discourage me from imagining myself a brilliant scientist. Indeed, it's amazing how early such a thought came to

me.

I liked learning; I liked school so much. I liked The Books of Knowledge that were always in our living room I loved our house and the neighbours and my brothers and sisters and my mother and father. I loved the field out back, the games we used to play, the stories Daddy would read us, the freckles on his face and hands, the turning pages, the sense of being secure and happy in a sweet little nest, as one song went, for all time.

I loved his lap, his arms, his kisses, his swooping me up when he got home and his hugging and kissing me with his bristly moustache. I loved the dancing look in his eyes, the good feeling he gave me, the feeling that I'd never be without his love and guidance. No, not even when the time came – oh, still so far away! – that I'd have to venture forth, a full-grown woman, and find my own place in the sun.

I grew up swift and straight, in good soil, but my roots weren't deep-set. Hence I ended up suffering the same fate as that transplanted apple tree out back. They chopped off so much of the root that it wouldn't grow. It stood there the last year like an ominous sign of death.

The attempts. The first was with Tylenol. She was rushed to the hospital to get her stomach pumped. The second, a couple of years later, was with her own medicine and nearly killed her.

Sharon's Story: Part V

There's this poem by Yeats that always had a gripping effect on me. It's called "Leda and the Swan." The last stanza goes: "Being so caught up / So mastered by the brute blood of the air / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"

Transposing this question to my own case, the answer is no. I had no time to put on knowledge and power before the sudden blow, before the feathered glory could push itself between my thighs, before the indifferent beak could let me drop. I had no time to think that life wasn't always fair, that it could play cruel tricks on you, that it could give so much and then take it away. I had no time to think that the dearest most precious things in life were really hobgoblins ready to leer out and laugh at your naivety and innocence. Or that the most profound feelings of your heart could be abandoned and allowed to dry up. Or that the strength and steadfastness that you'd so much depended on could suddenly go tottering down the street without so much as a backward glance.

I had no time to know that a child's heart and dreams could be fattened up like sacrificial beasts dumbly awaiting the knife that would slaughter them.

It was at the time of this second attempt that I was earnestly reading Sylvia Plath's poems. I was struck by all the parallels between Plath and my sister. I wrote a poem in memory of the first that, despite my sister's still being alive (albeit unwillingly), was also in memory of her.

A formidable mood infects
The poems. The precision words
March to the dirge of meaning.
Behind them lies a menace
Like a blank page. An empty
Parade square.

Dead hands, dead stringencies
Aloft in the dew of Ariel's flight
Return to the earth of memory.
Her strict art blood-nourishes
A sweet recall.

O melancholy sister, fragile storm-scudded vessel,
You broke yourself upon the sharp cliffs of Elsinore.
Ophelia-like, the narrowing branch beckoned and
You balanced ticklishly between two watery courses
Until the fretful game seemed hardly worth
The candle.

Class-achiever, conformist-girl,
What ill-bred muse was it that
Made you wear your hard-won
Laurels like cast-off seaweed?
No mermaid-change, your legs
Grew scales all the same;
Your scrubbed looks as wholesome
As American pie encased a dying
Starfish-life.

Lorelei, put down your white arms.
Though they be moonstruck I am not.
O how fairly they entreat me to
The watery bed!

I embrace the heaven-sweeping spar
that never touches but
Points and point and points.
Your song contracts my heart;
It's all I can give you.

Sharon's Story: Part VI

I eventually got married, bore a child, became pregnant with a second, and then for the first time bore the full weight of not caring about life. At least this is one way of putting it, more conventional than saying that for the first time I let the weight I'd been carrying around for so long slide completely off me. All that caring and carrying around that people think is so healthy but really was part of my sickness because, deep down, I didn't believe in it. Or at least I didn't believe in it in the way of thinking it would ever succeed in restoring to me the happiness I'd once known. No, if there was anything great and true and glorious that I could still pay homage to, that I could still truly believe in, it was ethical. I carried my burden around out of a sense of honour and duty. I was strong, psychologically speaking, only in this way. As a consequence, I had something rather mixed and diluted, something even contradictory, something that perhaps was bound to collapse as a personal philosophy. Something like being a Kantian on the one hand and a Nietzschean on the other. Something like accepting essentially bourgeois values by viewing them in a heroic light. All this worked for a time and even my repeated collapses could be – always after the fact of course – viewed as a kind of personal triumph. To be thrown in hades time and time again and, just as many times, climb back out, what wasn't there about this that shouldn't have been viewed by me as being – extraordinary?

To imagine a wretchedness so great and prolonged as to take one finally over to the other side of not caring. Of not feeling. What else could it be?

Sharon's Story: Part VII

Lazarus-like, I came back from deep depression many times. The body's own strength brought me back. Stays in a tomb-like hospital resuscitated me. Systems of support, social and familial, reminded me of my indebtedness and the espoused value of a human life.

I came back like a knocked-down fighter willing to try one more round in the ring. I came back even after my corner had thrown in the towel but it was ruled out on a technicality. Something about only feigning to go down and

lie still on the mat. I was made to get up.

She struggled for six more years after the attempt on her life that nearly succeeded. The children had a chance to grow up a little with their mother. There were times we thought her sickness was never going to end just as there were times we thought she was finally on the road to recovery.

Sharon's Story: Part VIII

You can't feel well simply for the sake of others. A common thought perhaps commonly accepted but so inimical to what a mother is supposed to be about that I know it's denied over and over again. I myself denied it and I gathered my forces over and over again to place my heart where I thought my head was even though my head was always secretly with my heart. An infinite desire to crawl back into the womb myself, to go back to where I'd come from, surpassed all other desires. To do that impossible thing of reversing time and going back back back – towards happiness and then nothing.

She knew what she was doing the third time. There would be no chance of being propped back on her feet and asked to fight another round. No, all the will and strength of mind she had managed to muster over the years finally reversed themselves and she sped towards death with a now practised aim and calculated intent. Her navigational skills on this particular course had been honed to perfection. She crashed through the window and, with broken wings, flew to where I know not if not into the hearts and minds of others.

Sharon's Story: Part IX

It came quickly and inexorably. The decision. And then the action. No longer was it for me a case of "To be or not to be." No longer a hedging on life and death, a playing off of one against the other. It was clear and distinct, Cartesian, eminently sensible as the answer to the contradictions that had entangled my life. It came to me like a piece of wisdom that moved beyond regret and resentment, beyond this rough world that had borne me. It came from a far-off country I cared not to know except that its embrace was love – complete and total love. I took the medication. I overdosed. I went to lie down in the cool of the basement. I knew I was into something bigger and more momentous than I'd ever been before. I felt completely understood.

I touched her stiff body in the cool dark basement. The sun's heat was torrid outside. My oldest sister wailed in the background. It was very eerie and

sickly-smelling in that mildewed basement that had never smelled right. I brought the world in with a phone call. Initial shock gave way to that sort of voluptuous feeling that dares not speak its name.

“Sharon’s Statement (1989)”
**(A presumption on the part of one who feels he’s seen
a little way down the road she took)**

“All my adult years I struggled mightily to create a fairly normal but fulfilling life for myself. This despite the fact that at age fourteen I came to the conclusion that life is essentially hell and hope its most refined, most insidious, and most subtle torment.

“How could I bear this revelation at age fourteen? Who was there around me who would understand? Did they, who were older and presumably wiser than I, not see the painful, soul-wrenching, soul-destroying meaninglessness of it all? Where were those mentors who might have lit lamps and guided my thoughts in this oppressive labyrinth and tomb-like state? Did I, at age fourteen, see more keenly what others, on their deathbeds and in the final throes of shaking off life’s restraining hand, set their teeth against but nonetheless taste foully, bitterly, and, yes, perhaps, even with final flashes of anger and resentment?

“Oh, I weep over all this! I weep over this strange, unwarranted seasoning of my tender years! I cry out at the injustice of this terrifying visitation upon a too tame and timid soul! I grieve over the all too early oppression of my youthful spirits: – gaiety, spriteliness, awe, wonder, and all the romantic songbirds of my soul fled, fled! – the dying light! (Lost in a dark woods with neither a wicked stepmother to blame for leaving me there nor a beneficent, knowing spirit to guide me out – this was my fate in the year that caught me between childhood and growing up.)

“So what was I to do now – I who at age fourteen was forced to bear this crushing load? I who at a very young age already felt stooped shoulders set in, pain with every step, and a collapse to the earth as something welcoming, inviting? To be shunned and held at arm’s length of course but still held, held! – as both terror and temptation, don’t you see?... I found the strength to carry this martyr’s cross (so I wished to look upon it and so you may wish to look and find what answers you will here) and whatever tricks of mind or fanciful deceits I used to lighten this burden should not be judged too harshly. When the way seemed to lead less and less towards the darkening, storm-rent clouds of Golgotha and more and more towards the

blue suburban niceties of day-to-day existence, I even forgot for a time I carried a great burden. I even forgot for a time the flickering yet lengthening shadows – ominous, omni-present yet quietly, queerly, quixotically seductive – while gambolling in the noontide sunlight.”

I followed my sister’s course – the physical side of it – right to the time she was put in the oven. The attendant explained to me how it worked and showed me the bags of white powder. It was all over in a few minutes.

*The day she visited the dissecting room
They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,
Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume
Of the death vats clung to them.*

We come from a country stranger than all rationality and all animality. This is the saving grace. That we can look a bit past ourselves to what we both are and are not is the religious reflection in its most obscure profundity. But more satyr than saint am I for having such a thought. No religion do I hold to per se. If I have strength, I gain it from a land that is well beyond me and a rough sort of gratitude is my worship. My daily rites are being as free as possible as well as always being at the service of my freedom. My confession is this long drawn-out thing called *On Truthtelling* and my liturgy the world in its utmost diversity.

I continued to live after my sister’s death, write poems, and play the indestructible. A strong libido no doubt helped to propel me in this direction. A world full of attractive females was not a world that would easily lose its charm and piquancy. Indeed, it was invariably one of these delightful creatures that would inspire me to write a poem from time to time.

*She makes me – feel happy;
She can warm with a smile;
Her charm is quite simple –
Without woman’s guile.*

*She makes me – feel happy;
I go away so.
After the small-talk between us
There’s a warm after-glow.*

*She makes me – feel happy;
It can’t be denied.*

*She's so pleasant and playful,
It's like spring-time inside!*

*She makes me – feel happy;
She's so straight, good, and true.
That such creatures do exist
Alone good feelings does imbue.*

*She makes me – feel happy.
She can warm with a smile;
But to feel myself old
Is a little sad – meanwhile.*

*