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The Shadow Pandemic: Imagine What It Is Like

“I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy,” says Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. I write to you to show you, actually to help you understand a story so misconstrued and misunderstood. I want you to understand I do this not to criticize or chastise but to alert you and refocus your eyes. My aim in this piece is not to compare domestic violence to the pains and trials of chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (CIPD) patient Sarah Manguso or insinuate that they are equal in magnitude, as they are separate entities. My aim is to use poetry, a powerful tool, to create a metaphor from the breathtaking narrative of this terrible illness in order to paint a picture of the horrors of domestic violence and communicate my own, and potentially others’, experience with abusive relationships. The imagery and analogies can help one understand how it happens and its tolls on the survivors. I will use Manguso’s words to draw out some comparisons to the experience of abuse. The importance of poetry, with its associations and resonances, and of narrative in learning to communicate and understand the communicated ideas, is central to healing. Rafael Campo alludes to this when he says, “To me the patient’s voice, the stories they have to tell are absolutely central to the work of healing… The poetry of the encounter helps me to think even more effectively and more thoughtfully really about that. I feel like listening to that story and really attuning my ear to the patient's voice helps me listen to their heart more clearly.” All quotes that follow, which are in bold italic, are from Sarah Manguso’s, *The Two Kinds of Decay*, unless otherwise stated.

*Now I can try to remember what happened. Not understand. Just remember.* (3)

Now the question always comes up, why do you stay with someone who treats you badly? Why do you stay when he hurts you? Why do you stay when she hurts you? Why do you stay when they hurt you? To be able to recollect memories of times when we allow people to treat us poorly is one thing, but to understand in order to talk about why is a very difficult task.

*I’d come down with some kind of bug that was making me feel tired. I walked stiff-legged and slowly, and I was still nearly drowning every time I washed my face. My feet were numb, and my hands were getting numb, too.* (8)

Waking up every morning inside the same body, a body that is abused consistently, she walks but she doesn’t feel. She looks at her hands and can not feel. She splashes cold water on her face but can’t seem to clean the despair on her face. Tired. Exhausted. She continually does the same thing, getting ready for the same thing.

*With my own blood in me, I couldn’t feel, and I couldn’t move, but with other people’s blood in me, and with chemicals in me, I could do those things.* (14)

Thoughts of not having a life outside of this relationship continue to contaminate her bloodstream. The words he calls her, stupid, useless, weak, problematic, and ugly, continue to circulate through her vessels and arteries until it reaches her brain. Her body can not move. She breathes the fresh air outside of the house when she goes to work or school. Going to school, entering into a new world, she interacts with new people and for a second things become possible. She is no longer those labels. Maybe she is something to the world and not a waste of space. Women who exist in abusive households still continue to have somewhat productive lives outside of the abuse. They are the hard workers at work. The
top of their class. The best swimmer. The most caring person who bought a cake for Sheryl’s birthday at the office. The quiet student in the classroom who writes the best papers. The mother of four. The daughter of the pastor.

*Apheresis did a good job of cleaning out the mess in my blood, but since it only removes the antibodies once they’re secreted into the blood, and doesn’t prevent the body from making more, apheresis wasn’t a permanent solution to the problem of my disease.* (13)

The whiff of fresh air that makes it seem like life is “normal” is a temporary fix for the pain that lies at home waiting to reinfect the bloodstream with negativity, blows to the side, and images of chilling eyes that want to overstep boundaries.

*All autoimmune diseases invoke the metaphor of suicide. The body destroys itself from the inside.* (14)

The body begins to turn blind to the bad, destroying any voice inside that says you do not deserve this. Dying inside comprises not being able to feel who you are and the death of the slight idea that you deserve a love better than this.

*It is not easy to lie still with a fourteen gauge needle in each arm, for four hours, shaking with cold that doesn’t go away no matter how many heated blankets are tucked over you. The cold comes from the inside.* (12)

No matter how many people tell her that she doesn’t deserve to be treated like this she continues to believe she does. No matter how many times friends tell her that this is abuse, rape, sexual assault, emotional abuse, or physical abuse she couldn’t seem to shake the coldness. It comes from inside. It doesn’t matter how many times comforting warm words are used to approve that what is being done is wrong. It is still and will always be cold inside because she doesn’t believe it herself.

*Unused to being frail, I returned to college and stayed up very late that first night reading mail and writing papers and cleaning out the refrigerator, and in the morning I lay in bed vomiting into the wastepaper basket from fatigue, and less than two weeks later I was back in the hospital.* (33)

Things seem to go back to normal at times. There are no more hits. They don’t get angry and hurtful. The love is restored and beautiful. It’s refreshing. He’s rubbing her feet asking her how work is. She is making sweet and passionate love to him that is unforced and light. Touches are light and sweet. Words are playful and comforting. Then, again, it changes without any warning. Now the cycle starts over again and she is waiting for the next day of restoration, feeling broken and alone.

*The world, with its infinite variables, is the wrong place to attempt implementing the scientific method. Most successful experiments work only in vacuums. Boyle’s law, Newtonian mechanics — only in vacuums are they true. Narratives in which one thing follows from the previous thing are usually imaginary.* (29)

To believe that there are always red flags and a sequence of events leading up to the abuse is ignorant. There is no scientific method or equation that can tell you this will be bad and it will happen in two days, two years, two months, or 24 years. There exist infinite variables that play in the dynamics of this relationship. Is he struggling to support his family back home and frustrated? Did she lose her job, the only source of income at the moment? Mental illness? Bipolar disorder? Low self esteem? Fear of the future? Daddy issues? Mother issues? Those who believe that one stays in abusive relationships for only
the monetary security of the partner are uncomfortably wrong. It’s deeper than that. There will always be more than one case with more than one thing that dictates the direction and actions of the involved parties.

*The pathology is now understood as the immune system’s generation of antibodies targeting the peripheral nerves’ myelin, their protective and conductive protein sheath.* (19)

Continued shots to the protective matter that surrounds her soft emotional spots exposes sensitive material. The deep place that she keeps what makes her human, her core that tells her who she is, her identity is exposed. Every cruel touch at that raw material sends agonizable shots of pain and confusion through her body until she’s numb. These shots that break down that protective matter are not always aggressive abuse or hurtful demolishing words but love and hope that this will get better. Hoping that maybe one day this will all be for something, she keeps pushing. She loves him because humans are more than what they do, or that’s what she hopes for at least.

*Sever all complications now, the numbness said, no matter how dear.* (104)

Cut off people who say it won’t work. Cut off others who will distract you from this separate world you have created for yourself because they don’t know and see that he doesn’t mean it. They don’t see him when he is at his best. She has two kids who need a father. She has dedicated so much time and energy to this relationship. They’ve been together since freshman year of college and he wasn’t abusive then. Now it’s been 4 years since he has touched her in a loving manner. There are so many different cases. She believes she belongs here and your opinions confuse her and introduce cognitive dissonance, which is uncomfortable. It’s better to be numb and run away from people because it’s better than feeling shame and confusion.

*The doctor was older than my parents, and he must have had plenty of younger patients, but he didn’t understand yet that suffering, however much and whatever type, shrinks or swells to fit the size and shape of a life.* (83)

Domestic violence is not one size fits all garment. Not every woman has the same experience, the same reaction or the same detrimental feelings. Don’t expect a poster child for it.

*He didn’t approve of plasma exchange, which just tidied up the immune system’s spill of poison into the blood without stopping up the leak that caused the spill.* (88)

Posting on social media about abusive homes and calling out to people in those environments doesn’t really fix anything. Saying on national TV, “keep your homes calm” does nothing except make you feel better. Existing in two parallel worlds where she goes to work and feels calm and then goes back home to a never ending cycle of pain does not solve the problem. It all is just a momentary fix for a long term issue.

*The worst part about being sick was not having enough energy to feel powerful and fast. Not enough energy to run away.* (110)

The feelings of not being able to run away or inflict positive change on her abuser drains energy from her to the point where she no longer feels powerful or strong. What’s worse is she knows she has no energy to leave. That feeds into the thought that she is incapable of being powerful and strong, even
though she is just by staying alive. That knowledge breaks down any last shred of confidence if the abuser didn’t already.

*The only hard thing I’d done in my life was recovering from a disease. My self-image had been highly susceptible to that event. It constituted most of my identity.* (136)

Everything that is done for a long time becomes a habit, a regular tendency that is hard to give up. Abuse becomes part of her identity and for some odd reason she believes she can’t live without it. People believe it is because she can’t live without him. That is beyond wrong. It’s called learned helplessness.

*Nothing happens in a moment. Nothing happens quickly. If you think something’s happened quickly, you’re looking at only a part of it. Firing a rifle shot seems to happen quickly, but what about the movement of the trigger finger? What about the decision to fire the rifle? What about all your careful target practice? What about everything in your life that happened before you decide to fire that rifle?* (182)

*But to pay attention is to love everything.* (183)

There are women who are currently in abusive households and because of quarantine they are trapped 24/7 in those homes, with no hope of getting out soon. During the coronavirus quarantine, domestic violence has increased dramatically not only in the US but worldwide. Economic stressors due to the shut down of many businesses serves unfortunately as a trigger for abuse. From the statistics released by the UN, after March 17 France reported a 30 percent increase in domestic violence, the emergency number for domestic violence in Spain recorded an 18 percent increase in calls, Singapore received 30 percent more calls, and in the US law enforcement has witnessed a 35 percent increase. These times should make us think of how we can not return back to “normal” but must strive to be better. There needs to be longer term support structures and systems that exist in order to relieve the dependency of women and children on patriarchal household structures. There must be heavy support for safe spaces in our communities for these survivors. As Natasha Lennard from the Intercept said, “The long term plague of domestic violence is too deadly and rampant for responses that amount to nothing.”
Works Cited


