Morgan Segal had it all: looks, brains, talent and a loving family.

Her poetry could turn simple observations into compelling imagery, shaping one’s senses to her own vivid perceptions of a second reality.

Everyone knew that someday the young woman with the dark vision of a Sylvia Plath would achieve something special in life.

Her future, woven through the imperative nature of the words she wrote, seemed assured.

But there was something troubling about her too, a silence that cloaked her youth, a loneliness only fleetingly detected.
I met Morgan four years ago through her grandfather, Leon Lasken, a gentle and solicitous man whose small grocery store in South-Central L.A. had survived the ’92 riots.

Neighbors cared about Lasken as much as he cared about them. His was a giving heart, offering food to the hungry and money to those who struggled, and when flames lit the skies of April his store remained untouched.

When I came to interview him, Morgan was there. She wanted to write and wondered if she could sit in on the interview. I agreed.

She was a lovely woman who seemed far younger than her 25 years, in some ways as thin and fragile as winter sunlight. Her manner was beyond timidity.

But writers are often hesitant people. The moment gave no hint of the darkness in her soul.

I heard from her occasionally over the next few years. She sent me a short story to judge and poems to evaluate and asked to interview me for a college newspaper.

Morgan seemed obsessed with learning, which may have been an effort to solve her own feelings of haunting inadequacy. A master’s degree from UC Santa Barbara wasn’t enough. Courses followed at Pepperdine, USC and Sarah Lawrence.

And always she wrote.

I wish now I had saved her work. I can only recall bits of the short story, about a woman in a classroom reaching across the gray and muffled environment of academia to a man three rows up.

She was trying to make psychic contact with him, a circumstance, I learned later, that Morgan herself had failed to achieve in similar situations. Human relations were increasingly difficult for her. Shadows were falling.

“She was giving life her best shot,” Lasken would say later, tears in his voice, “but nothing was working for her.”

Her parents noticed a growing detachment. Realizing it herself, Morgan sought help and began taking anti-depressants. They didn’t work.

“She became a walking dead person,” her sister Hilary says. “There was no pain, no emotion in her life. She felt nothing.”
If there was poetry still in her, she denied it. If there was hope, she refused it. And on a quiet afternoon in October, Morgan Segal, still in her twenties, ended her life with an overdose of the very medication intended to save her.

I heard of it through Lasken, who wrote: “My granddaughter, the one you know, killed herself last night. What should I do?”

It was a shock beyond belief. Whatever I might have suspected of Morgan’s fragility and loneliness, despair never seemed a factor.

My comparison of her to poet Sylvia Plath, who also committed suicide, is hindsight, not perception.

As I thought about it later, I realized how little we know of each other and how easily we mask our anguish. Sometimes we hide it from ourselves.

Morgan wasn’t even her real name. It was Leslie. She had created a separate persona for herself, assuming the identity of Morgan le Fay, the fairy enchantress of Arthurian legend with the power to create beautiful illusions.

It was a life she tried to tolerate, beyond an existence that was causing her to tumble with devastating precipitousness into a final abyss.

I tried to encourage her, but I wonder now if there was more I could have said, better words I might have offered to lift her beyond the darkness which, for whatever reason, was making her life intolerable.

Writing has turned an unbearable childhood into a challenging career for me, and I think it could have done the same for Morgan . . . or Leslie. The rhythms were there, but the shadows prevailed.

Her sister sent me one of Morgan’s last poems:

A young woman sleeps on a bench. / A bus casts a shadow over her / Her features disappear into the darkness / I walk past her / Telling myself that I am different / My hand trails the railing of the doctor’s office. / How long have I been coming here? / The woman on the bench is gone.

And so, sadly, is the fairy enchantress called Morgan.