

From literature to medicine A psychiatrist's search for resilience

Christine Montross wrote her first memoir, *Body of Work: Meditations on Mortality from the Human Anatomy Lab*, when she was still a medical student. In it she described the process of dissecting a cadaver with a poet's attention to detail and metaphor. When her female cadaver inexplicably lacked an umbilicus, for example, she and her lab partners named her Eve. Anatomy lab became for her, as for many medical students, an initiation into the complicated emotional work of being a doctor. She learned to contain her emotions without becoming indifferent.

Montross has now published her second memoir, *Falling Into the Fire: A Psychiatrist's Encounters with the Mind in Crisis*, about her residency as an inpatient psychiatrist caring for patients with mental illness in crisis. Each chapter focuses on patients who are "tormented by their ideas about their bodies"—patients with body dysmorphic disorder and body integrity identity disorder. What can she do for people who alleviate mental suffering by harming themselves physically? How should she treat a woman who is repeatedly admitted to hospital for swallowing knives, scissors, light bulbs, and bedsprings? Or a man who undergoes plastic surgery to correct imagined facial flaws? Or a young mother who obsessively imagines killing her child?

When Montross discusses these case studies, she is like a detective solving a mystery, searching for the right diagnosis and the best treatment. At the same time, her book is also a meditation on her loss of complete faith in medicine. She expected to emerge from medical school having mastered knowledge of the human body and the methods used to treat illness. But psychiatrists

work at the "baffling intersection of the mind and body", and the uncertainty she confronts every day raises doubts: "If I hold my trust in medicine up to the light, I see that it is full of cracks and seams. In some places it is luminous. In others it is opaque." "And yet", she writes, "I practice". Over time, she has developed a trust in the daily work of talking, treating, and attempting to heal.

This description of *Falling Into the Fire* may suggest that Montross dwells on the less heroic aspects of the profession. Instead of focusing on astounding feats of diagnosis and breakthrough treatments, she chooses to contemplate the daily practice of psychiatry. Throughout her memoir she reveals how she gradually developed new forms of faith and resilience. In residency, she recognised that people who are well "live beneath a veil of invulnerability", but that "mental illness pierces the veil". Her role as a psychiatrist, she decides, "is not to try to repair the veil but to strengthen patients so that they can live, so that they can suffer less, so that they can hope". There is an understated heroism in this work.

Learning to cope with the suffering of patients without distancing herself from their pain also teaches her about caring for herself. How can she attend to minds in crisis without falling into the fire herself? How can she resist despair and sustain resilience? Montross answers these questions by closing each chapter with a short personal narrative about life beyond the hospital. These stories often arrive abruptly and they can seem tangential to the topic of mental illness, but they are not at all extraneous. In them, Montross contemplates the relationship of professional resilience to mental

health. She locates her own resilience in her family life—in the house by the ocean where she lives with her wife and two children. Using just right metaphor, she says that her family is her mooring—a secure hold in an insecure setting.

In the personal sections of the book, Montross often relies on the ocean as a metaphor for beauty, endurance, upheaval, and catastrophe. She finds that, working with patients who are so difficult to diagnose and treat, "you have to be anchored to the shore—to the people and things that are central to your own life". Knowing this allows Montross to commit to a quiet and often unappreciated form of medical practice: she abides with her patients in the midst of uncertainty.

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