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extra

Out of me

Fiona Shaw

When I began writing this book, I did so in the effort to shore myself up against the whirling chaos of my mind. I was in fear of disintegration, though I couldn't, and still can't describe what I mean by that. I had no idea that my terror would give birth to a book. What has been important has been the act of turning blankness and confusion into narrative coherence, however provisional. And though I started by doing that with my experience after Jesse's birth, I quickly found myself doing the same thing with my earlier life. Though it's not effaced from my memory in quite the same way as the more recent past, I had no sense of coherence for any of it. I didn't know, before I began, how to go about making it out.

Two weeks in, the first shock of ECT ringing in my skull, continuity went. What I have left are mostly incidental snapshots of memory, recollections in monochrome, without atmosphere or expression. There is no affect, as a psychiatrist might say. They have none of the contrast of black and white, none of the warmth of colour. Were I to make a montage with them, all I'd have would be the static posture of someone who had lost her animation and was living a life by rote. From the start of my breaking down, Hugh was shocked by how much I seemed entirely myself. It seemed more terrible to him than if I had been unlike. But the narrowed, self-hating, minimal self, brittle as a Giacometti sculpture, that he visited every day is lost to my memory once ECT had begun. I no longer remember the shape of my despair. There is only a figure in grey, without thoughts or actions, without a voice even. No rage any more, waxing or waning.

Fiona Shaw described her experience of puerperal psychosis in *Out of Me: The Story of a Postnatal Breakdown*. It is an eloquent examination and exploration of the origins, nature and consequences of severe mental illness in the postpartum period. This excerpt is from *Out of Me* (pp. 72 & 204), Penguin Books, 1997.

Chosen by Femi Oyeboode.

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