Shari Goldberg

Luminous Waves

I was forty-two when I took my first surfing lessons, visiting Costa Rica during the winter break from the college where I taught in south-central Pennsylvania. I had never tried to surf before, never touched a board. On a bright hot morning, I sat with a small group of other tourists in a circle on the sand. No hotels lined the shore, only thick tropical greenery facing the rolling blue sea. We huddled toward the scant shade, sticky with sunscreen and buzzy with nerves.

Travis, who owned the instructional camp that would teach and house us, knelt back, relaxed. He asked us what we were afraid of.

"Sharks," said one woman. She was studying marine biology, she explained, but still.

"Being held under," said another, a former economist who was working on a romance novel. Both, I had learned on the bus ride to the lodge from the airport, were a few years younger than me.

"Riptides," threw in a tall German man, devoted to Kundalini yoga and much younger.

These struck me as good answers. My mind felt unfocused. There was no shade, really; the sun was too strong already. Did I fear a migraine headache every day of the week I was there? When I turned forty, the headaches that had been intermittent since my twenties had become chronic. The pain could last hours or days. In the interim, my right eye socket felt spiky, obtrusive, susceptible. It was as if I'd turned sensitive to everything: a cloud of perfume, overhead LEDs, a salty meal, a trafficky drive. A bad night's sleep, a sudden rain—things that were uncomfortable to most people, or that went unnoticed, were now toxic to me. Some I could avoid; some I couldn't; some existed at an undetectable neurological level. It was impossible to anticipate or plan. I'd wake in the

morning, wiggling to the left as if I could leave the pain on my pillow. By the time I rolled over I wanted to vomit out the insides of my skull. "Anything else I can do for you?" Dave, my partner, would ask, bringing me water and lowering the blinds. "A lobotomy?" I'd say. Slicing seemed a cleaner pain.

I shifted my forty-two-year-old body on the sand, squinted. I mentally counted out the drugs blister-packaged in my room. I agreed that riptides sounded terrifying.

More than a century earlier, Alice James had recalled the subsiding of one of her own five-day headaches: "I was thinking of something that interested me very much, and my mind was suddenly flooded by one of those luminous waves that sweep out of consciousness all but the living sense and overpower one with joy in the rich, throbbing complexity of life."

Alice James lived in the last four decades of the nineteenth century. Like her more famous brothers, William and Henry James, she was haphazardly educated in a peripatetic upbringing across Europe and the United States. She became a great reader, in French and in English. When she began her diary at forty, she was chronically ill and residing in England. She decided to write "a bit about what happens, or rather doesn't happen." She's a wry narrator.

The entry in which a luminous wave overtakes her appears toward the beginning of the diary, in 1889. She's almost forty-one years old. Her legs are paralyzed. Her stomach is sensitive, her nervous system reactive, her head prone to migraine. She spends her days in bed, or on the sofa, or being pushed outside in a Bath chair, precursor to the wheelchair. Her headache had elapsed in the night; when the wave appears the next morning, she's being dressed by her nurse. It's an ordinary ritual. But the wave is something that happens: a sudden ocean swell while she's in Leamington, a town smack in the middle of England.

James had grown up watching waves, immersed in them. She had taken two roundtrip transatlantic journeys before she was in her teens. At ten, the family had moved to Newport, Rhode Island, where she and her siblings spent summers swimming and sailing, and all seasons walking along the cliffs or the shore. At fourteen, they moved to a house with an ocean view. She had observed the water's ways.

I had less familiarity with the ocean. I wasn't perpetually bedridden, didn't need daily caretakers. Yet when I turned to James's diary to make sense of my decision to surf, I recognized, in her metaphor, the fresh surge of cognition that signals a headache's release. What James doesn't mention is how fatigued

one feels—wrung out—after the pain, even as mental activity restarts. It could take hours, or a full day, to revive, as the body returns to equilibrium. And James doesn't mention, either, how she's written through the headache—three entries—or the toll the effort of concentration has taken. Even on good days, I did less and less—less than my colleagues, less than my friends, less than I used to—because exertion meant pain and collapse. Committing to walks or coffee dates gave me jolts of anxiety. I didn't have reserves.

James's luminous wave pauses all this. It flashes power, living, joy, complexity. Her headache brings her to a sea. At this sea, for a moment, for a sentence, no one is tired.

A hundred and thirty years after James died and her diary was published, Joanna Hedva asks why an exhausting illness wouldn't be part of a surfing story. "What does it do when we force disability into the background of our stories," they ask, "as something either bad or bad but useful if it can be overcome, when it could be treated like love, war, coming of age, family, identity, et al.—a major subject that is strange, rich, powerful, and necessary to telling the story of life?" What if disability doesn't detract from life? What if the headache and the wave are the same story? What if we spin out those stories to discover what they hold?

The Christmas before I went to Costa Rica, Dave and I watched the sunset in Guadeloupe, in the eastern Caribbean, from a balcony overlooking the sea. We had been swimming in the morning and we were dry and relaxed. We could just make out a group of surfers, clustered by a wave breaking off to our right. As it got darker, one surfer would swim into shore, and then another, until we could barely see the last figures left.

"Look how they're reluctant to come in," I said to Dave as our view diminished.

The surfers were tiny in the distance. I had no sense of their motions or exertions, what it meant to manage a board, the muscles required to stand up, the look of a proper stance. But something had caught me. We watched again the next day, this time a closer view. One woman wore a full-body swimsuit, covering her limbs from the sun. She stood almost casually on her board, as if balanced not on the Atlantic ocean but a rhythmically rocking train. What a way to carry a body, I thought.

I recently listened to an interview with a woman in California who had started surfing at fifty-five. She had worked for the National Park Service, and

suggested that if you're athletic in your twenties and thirties and forties, and you stay that way, you can learn. I'd been a ski instructor, she said, and a rock climber, and a whitewater kayaker, and rowed crew in college—she tossed out her activities rapidly, as if she'd hardly exhausted her list. My background in no way matched hers. I worked inside, with paper and whiteboards, sitting in ergonomic chairs. I had never participated in an organized sport, outside of one tennis season in grad school in which a community coach had taken one look at my small stature and assigned me to a high school group. I studied Iyengar yoga, a slow, deliberate style. In summer camp, I'd languished in an intermediate swimming class, unable to try out water skiing or sailing. So I knew how to swim, yes, but slowly, with strokes that were not quite proper. Dave had given me an old running watch of his so that I could get faster when I swam at the Y. I wore it two or three times but forgot to push the buttons; I couldn't understand the point. I wasn't even a fast reader, and I was a literature professor—reading was my profession.

I didn't have credentials. I only wanted to balance. On a wave. Hedva asks, "What about stories that are enlivened, vivified, not despite illness and disability but because of them?" James gets her luminous wave only because her five-day headache resolves. Surfing, I'd learn, would never resolve a headache. Yet my inflamed head was being called to stay in the water a little longer. My unpredictable body was imagining floating on a wild sea. Weeks after we returned, I found myself on the website for the surf camp where I would first take lessons. I found myself clicking *book now* and watching videos about supportive bikinis.

Alice James's luminous wave lasted seconds—minutes, maybe. It augured no magical reversal of her condition. "Ah, woe, woe is me!" she complains a few months later. Her tone is ironic, but her problem is real: "these doctors tell you that you will die, or *recover*! But you *don't* recover. I have been at these alternations since I was nineteen and I am neither dead nor recovered—as I am now forty-two there has surely been time for either process."

The doctor's paradigm is a system of alternation: either you die or you recover. Another version might be: either you are getting worse or you are getting better. Even: either you are sick or you are well. The irritating presumption, for James, is that one arrives somewhere, at one pole or the other, that realigns one's prospects dramatically. But the proffered destinations never present for her. This is not to say that she undertakes no arrivals or departures, no changes

of state. Chronic illness—in between death and recovery, worse and better, sick and well—is not static. James's wave makes her feel within her "the potency of a Bismarck." Yet she remains intimate with "the Monster Rebound, which holds me in its remorseless clutch," and she is appalled when a friend asks her whether she is "in pain anywhere at that moment"—the question exposes their alienation from each other, because of course she is.

What the doctor's system of alternation fails to capture is this capacity for wild shifts—from days-long headache to continent-commanding potency—that coincides with constant discomfort. *You will die or you will recover* doesn't account for the fact that when a wave bursts through your consciousness, you're still not well. Or that when you rebound, it's not forever. Illness and wellness aren't opposite poles; they surge around each other, perpetually overlapping.

That first morning in Costa Rica, after Travis addressed our fears, he oriented us. He called our attention to the whitewater at the shore, the bluegreen waves further out, the direction of the wind, the quality of the ocean's surface, the tall bending trees we would stay near, the people frolicking we would try to avoid. Further down the beach was the sandbar, shaped like a giant whale's tail, that gave the site its name, Bahia Ballena.

Each day of the weeklong surf camp would go like this, Travis told us, surf theory on the sand, and then surf practice in the water. Theory, then practice. At that moment, my hazy mind sharpened. Travis had said that he'd grown up surfing in California, had surfed nearly his whole life. I lived two and a half hours from the shore on a good day, had maybe seen *Point Break* in junior high. The nerves along the right side of my head were ringing alarms. But as a professor, *theory, then practice* was familiar.

Theory, then practice let me ease from a body that didn't belong in surfing to one that might. I needed that loosening. I needed to notice that Travis read the waves of the ocean the way that I read the words of a text. "Do you see that wave coming?" he'd ask of an indistinct blue shape, later in the week. I didn't see what he saw, but I recognized his literacy. I felt a certain, distant kinship, resonating as a poise in my ribcage. From that first morning, I let Travis guide me. He began by teaching me to ride a wave on my belly. I held on to the sides of the board, the rails, pushed my chest up, and released into the whitewater, coasting a few yards toward the shore. It felt exhilarating. On the sand the next day, Travis drew surf boards and we practiced popping up, moving from lying on the board to standing. In the water, the other students peeled off with

different instructors—the women in one group, the German quickly advancing on his own, making strides across the ocean with his impossibly long arm span—and so Travis was teaching me alone. He held on to my board, stabilizing it, pushing me when the wave came. Over and over again I stood up shakily, for barely a second, before I fell. By the end of the day, by the end of the next couple of days, I could ride the whitewater upright. Travis would tell me when to pop up, and I would do it: I'd let his words guide my limbs as seamlessly as possible. I'd studied a proper stance—bent knees and turned torso and placed feet—but I couldn't deliberate at the moment a wave started to lift my board. *Just go,* I'd tell myself, which meant, *don't think about it.* Still I'd find, strangely, that once I was up, if my initial position was adequate, I had time. A second or two opened, to adjust, to shift my foot, and then I'd ride. Then no thinking, only thrill.

Surf theory on day three was about waves. An ocean wave, Travis explained, is energy in the water. It begins as a storm and it rolls through the sea. In the sand he drew the stages of the rolling, of the wave as it came to us: a barely perceptible bump, a higher hump, a hump listing to the right, a cresting shape pointing downward, a collapsed mess of water. I was still learning on that mess—the whitewater—but eventually I'd want to be on the wave in the second stage, as it grew, as it peeled, as it gathered to release the energy that it had grown over hours or days.

I spent the last day of the week on those bluegreen waves. Several afternoons I had been glazed with headache, but I had made it out each morning, and I had learned to paddle. I caught a wave or two on my own. The power of those larger waves amazed me. They took me, lifted me, transported me. My board let me touch their energy, let me tap it. It was energy that no sick person would ever have, energy that no well person would ever have, energy that no one has.

Attending to James's seascape scrambles the way most critics read her diary. She has a reputation as an invalid—perhaps nineteenth-century America's most famous invalid—who was cynically single-minded about her own suffering. Almost as soon as scholars began studying her work, it was to regard her illness as a cultivated state of being. Jean Strouse's *Alice James: A Biography* (1980) opens by arguing that James "became an invalid" instead of electing other distinguished careers: "a historian, or a writer on politics, a pioneer in women's education, or the leader of a radical movement." It wasn't that James became ill by circumstance, on this account, but that she attained the social

position of an invalid intentionally, as a choice. Ruth Bernard Yeazell enhanced this image of the purposeful invalid in *The Death and Letters of Alice James* (1981)—the more usual frame for such compilations being *The Life and Letters.* In Yeazell's view, James was not only ill by choice; she developed "a covert career in mortality." In other words, she polished her invalidism into a professional investment in dying. Other critics picked up this approach. Victoria Coulson calls the diary "a fascinating, irritating and perverse text whose author repeatedly asserts her desire to die," and Elizabeth Bronfen remarks that James "ceaselessly thought, talked and wrote about her death."

There's a commonality among James's critics and her doctors. Because her diary ends in her death, because she sometimes talks about being sick, the critics can only classify her work along the pole of not recovering, therefore dying. But it is not at all the case that James ceaselessly thought, talked, and wrote about her death. There are many cessations where she thinks and writes about death's inverse, about feeling inspired, alert, and attached to the world. In Hedva's words: enlivened, vivified.

Wondering at one point whether she might have preferred a formal education, James reflects on "those exquisite moments of mental flatulence which every now and then inflate the cerebral vacuum with a delicious sense of latent possibilities—of stretching oneself to cosmic limits—and who would ever give up the reality of dreams for relative knowledge?" It is difficult to read "mental flatulence" without a smile; the phrase hardly sounds delicious. Yet "stretching oneself to cosmic limits" is equally difficult to read cynically. It suggests a posture for catching waves.

Three months later, she records inflating her head in a more physiological sense: "I have an exquisite 30 seconds every day: after luncheon I come in from my rest and before the window is closed I put my head out and drink in a long draft of the spring." Is 30 seconds meant to self-deprecate? But again, drinking the long draft emphasizes refreshment, however brief, permitted by March's arrival. A similar entry consists of one line on the bodily pleasure of outdoor meditation: "I lay in a meadow until the unwrinkled serenity entered into my bones and made me one with the browsing kine, the still greenery, the drifting clouds, and the swooping birds."

The vibrancy that pulses in James's diary coexists with her record of physical and mental illness: to discover one is not to deny the other. She still writes about medical appointments, monitoring her symptoms, her limitations. She can only stick her head outside for 30 seconds!

Still, her time at the window meant breathing. As Margaret Price explains in her book *Crip Spacetime*, "Experiencing the material differences of life as part of a subaltern group—including the joys, the surprises, and the harms—constitutes a different reality." Illegible as it might have been to her doctors, to her critics, James chronicles a world that refuses to abide the death-or-recovery paradigm. She lived with a meadow in her bones. She lived with a wave in her mind. These were no fantasies. They belonged to her spacetime.

I bought a stand-up paddle board when I returned from Costa Rica to Pennsylvania. I took it along the Susquehanna and to local reservoirs, but: no waves. A couple of summers later, I wanted to return to the Central American Pacific coast, and this time booked an all-women's camp in Nicaragua. I practiced my push-ups and planks. Then I'd lie on the floor, limbs outstretched. For weeks I'd felt like I'd had rocks in my head.

I wasn't surprised when I woke up the second morning of the camp with a sharp buzz behind my right temple. We were old friends, this headache and I. It meant I could not eat, could not think, could not wait it out. One of the other women in the group helped me make a drippy ice pack in a Ziploc bag. The humidity was inescapable.

Later that week, I encountered some luminous waves. My goal was to learn to surf down the line—to turn into the wave, to ride its face. I had to set my eyes on the wave as I shifted into it, and found that from the side, it began to form a point, releasing drops and droplets while still holding its shape. It was under me and before me, a spectacular show. No wonder I kept falling.

Another time I got caught in a set of heavy waves—not trying to surf them, just to maintain my position and my grasp on my board until the set rolled through. I lifted my head between the waves, for a gasp of breath and a break from the violence. Suddenly I detected a fishy smell. There were dozens of silvery flying fish, no more than six inches long, jumping every which way all around me. Some hit me in the face. I was irrelevant, which meant I could take part. I went under, smiling, before the next wave crashed.

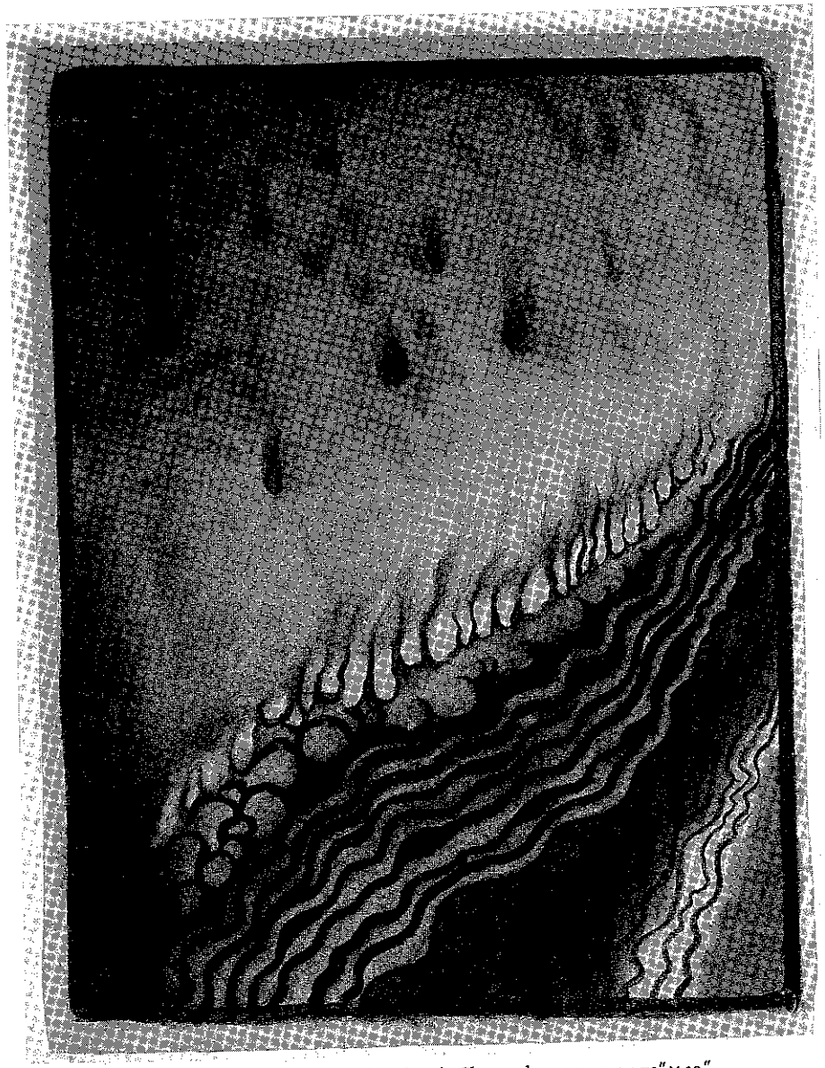
The next day the intensity of the sets had subsided, and the small right- or left-peeling shape I needed to practice on wasn't rolling in. I abandoned my new turning skill in favor of a ride, any ride. I popped up on whitewater, gliding for several seconds before smoothly hopping off as I coasted to the beach. It felt long, smooth, easy. It *was* easy—that's why I was trying to advance—but it was also what I needed at the moment. To just go. To not think about it.

When James returns her wave-soaked consciousness to her surroundings, she looks up, awed, at her nurse dressing her; her nurse reminds her of the five-day headache. James had "clean forgotten it." It was true that when I rode a wave I could consider nothing, not having a headache, not even, really, having a body. But approaching the ocean's power depended on situating my board in the water, situating my body on the board—I had to be positioned with care in order to be carefree. And the freedom I found wasn't even mine. It was the ocean that clean forgot my body, or that had never remembered it.

The contours of the ocean hold the water's energy, structure its tendencies to slow, climb, and peel. These variations, anthropologist Stefan Helmreich states, are what make the wave, what define it: "it is the pattern, not the water, that is the wave." Yet what I felt rushing beneath my board, lifting it up—when I caught the wave—was that pattern or water? And then standing up to surf: which was I standing upon? These are ways of asking *why water*, or *why waves*—why turn to these terms to talk about the confluence of illness and health?

Or maybe it's not a *why* question, but a *how* question: how do you know which is which—water or wave, health or illness? I was thinking about these fine distinctions as I turned the pages of a recent catalog of a Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. There's a drawing from 1915 she labeled "special" that had this additional tag: "Drawing No. 9 is the drawing of a headache. It was a very bad headache at the time that I was busy drawing every night, sitting on the floor in front of the closet door." The drawing is in charcoal and is organized along a diagonal; a series of wavy lines stretch from the bottom left up toward the right middle of the page. Along the lines on the left, there are rows of clustered round shapes; the shape repeats, darkened and more scattered, spreading open like droplets, in the top portion of the drawing. To the right, darker straighter lines, closer to vertical.

The curators of the exhibit observe how the designs of O'Keeffe's drawings repeat and develop in other drawings and in paintings. There are a series of sketches of Palo Duro Canyon from 1916 to 1917 in which the round shapes from the headache drawing seem to find their place as boulders and then rocks in the distance. Another series, *Blue #1–Blue #4*, are watercolors from 1916 that feature tight curves in the top of the composition and strong lines along the same diagonal as in the headache drawing. You can move from them to any number of drawings or paintings that depict wave-like forms more explicitly:



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Special No. 9* (1915). Charcoal on paper, 24.75″ × 19″.
Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

Early No. 2, with a swirl like the top of a violin; *No. 12 Special*, with swirls that start to fall away from each other like a toppling crest; *No. 8 Special*, which

zooms in on the center of the swirl; *Blue 1*, which gives the swirl more curvaceousness and depth through color.

But then there's an untitled drawing from 1916–1917 that also resembles those round shapes from the headache charcoal. No canyon, no boulders. No color to suggest a scene. Only a repeating form, an abstract pattern. In 1916, O'Keeffe had been studying with arts educator Arthur Wesley Dow, who describes repetition as "almost instinctive, perhaps derived from the rhythms of breathing and walking, or the movement of ripples and rolling waves." O'Keeffe's repetition might bring us a ripple, or a wave, but a ripple or a wave might be a way of representing repetition. A wave might be an oceanographic phenomenon or it might be a practice of making a shape over and over and over.

O'Keeffe's series suggests to me that's it's not quite right to say that it's the pattern, not the water, that is the wave. The pattern and the figure—like the pattern and the water—slip into each other, generate each other. It's the pattern in the water; it's the pattern and the water; it's the water or the pattern; it's the water with the pattern. Waves are a way to talk about the emergence of vitality in chronic illness, because feeling well is a new configuration on lasting cells.

And since no matter how good the waves are, they are nothing without water, you draw even when you feel terrible. The drawing of a headache. A canyon. A swirl. In 1923: O'Keeffe writes from York Beach, Maine, to Alfred Stieglitz, whom she will soon marry, "—My great top of the worldness this morning—early—turned to a headache—I worked anyway—." Her top of the worldness sounds a little like James's Bismarck moment. It doesn't last. Her pain does. But she keeps drawing. In drawing is the potential for what has happened to happen again and what has happened to change. In drawing is the potential for luminosity. The curators of the exhibit write that her series "ebb and flow and stutter and recur." O'Keeffe works like she is on the water.

I learned to balance on a wave. But most of the time, I fell. Surfing is 70 percent falling, Travis said, 20 percent paddling, and 10 percent riding. No doubt a beginner falls even more. I established no steady surf practice, so I was always beginning. The winter break after my Nicaragua trip, Dave and I visited the big island of Hawaii. My friend Victoria, an experienced surfer, took me out one morning to Mahaiula, a bay bearing rocky cliffs and a tall right-peeling wave. After a long paddle out to it, I spent two hours struggling to get up, tumbling, slipping. A forceful wave would push me out toward shore before I'd have a

chance to stand up on it, and I'd wind up in the set's violent whitewater, pummeled over and over again, unable to paddle back out to the calm. One more try, I kept telling Victoria. One more wave. Eventually, I gave up.

A few days later, we ran into some friends of hers, another woman our age and one around seventy, both fierce surfers. She told them we'd been to Mahaiula, gestured to me: "She crushed it." In reality, I had floundered. Unless some days, in some conditions, just managing your board and not getting too beat up is crushing it. Victoria got headaches too.

We could call my accounts of James and O'Keeffe, the ways I've made their headaches significant to their artistry, recovery. Literary scholars use *recovery* to describe analytic or archival work that brings a text, or an aspect of it, from obscurity into critical and pedagogical circulation. Such recovery might be an alternative to death if we think of death as obliteration: either a text lies moldering in the archives or it is meticulously read by a scholar, published, and returned to the world.

But the type of recovery I'm performing is more complicated. To return to James's case, if we only read the notes of illness and mortality that she strikes in her diary, we manifest an ill woman whose story ends in death. If we manage to read the notes of vivacity and energy that she also strikes in her diary—if we manage to read them as struck, following Hedva, because of her disability—we still manifest an ill woman whose story ends in death. Yet we come to understand how being ill can produce luminous waves, cosmic extension, exquisite inhalations, serene rests in meadows. Not as denial, not as compensation, not as transcendence—as a way of being, a way of living, a way of narrating disability. Verbs that would, in the context of sickness, indicate invasion or routine (*flooded, stretching, rest, drink, lay, entered*) articulate thrill, renewal, relief. One language for being sick and being thrilled. The story evolves, revolves.

It's a pattern that stays with me when I pop a pill after walking out of the ocean, my board at my side (tight shoulders, thirsty hours). Most waves aren't luminous. They tire. They hurt. They are born of the volatility of storms. I'm still learning to read them. Will that wave be a right or a left? Where will it break, where is the crest, where do I need to be to ride it? Is it a boulder or a gentle swirl? Neither. Both.