

MICHAEL MOTE

Interconnected, 2013
Oil on Canvas, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY SPINDRIFT GALLERY

FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

Dry Season Losing and finding myself in the surf

Just three waves, my friend Sherie and I tell ourselves as we tramp down to our rocky Northern California break, only to see the waves blown out or too big or closed out or too small. Set the expectations low, avoid wishful thinking, abnegate all claims on magnificence, and simply try to catch a wave. Then another. Then another. That's all, and make it be enough. Not to get all Zen-and-the-art-of-surfing on you, but reined-in expectations can be an architect of happiness: low expectations, reduced hopes, and paying all attention to each step it takes to do whatever it is you're doing—such as catching one wave, then two, then three. Bobbing on the water by the base of the raggedly majestic Mount Tamalpais; in the distance, a thick tongue of fog obscuring all but two tips of the Golden Gate Bridge; the cold electricity of saltwater on my skin; and every once in a while the smooth canine head of a sea lion popping up beside me with inquisitive brown eyes: shouldn't this be enough? Yes, and sometimes it is.

And then there are those days when the waves are especially big or small or I'm feeling especially weak or out of practice, like I may have trouble lifting my own body in one snap from belly to feet, kicking my legs underneath myself in a single motion. Those are the days I am both questioning and congratulating myself for simply getting me and my board to the beach, for stripping down to skin in the overcast chill and pushing my body into the 4-mm-thick wetsuit and the neoprene gloves, booties, and hood. Those are the days I am whispering to myself as I wade into the cold water, my board at my side, doglike in its loyalty and companionship, in the way it stays just a leash-length away from me because in fact we are tethered by a leash. Those are the days I am saying aloud, for me and my dog to hear, "Just one wave."

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A person can make a meditation out of anything, and lately I have been making mine of listening. Unlike the cypress and eucalyptus of my local beach in my native state, the palm trees where I am now in coastal Costa Rica, in the province of Guanacaste, have no real scent. It's January, dry season, so what you smell is heat, interrupted by passing whiffs of cooking, brush burning, and whatever body lotion you happen to be wearing. Though I am sweating all the time, even at night, I can't seem to smell it. So when I

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need to filibuster my mind away from the bone it is chewing—a broken heart, of course—the sense I pay attention to is sound. I close my eyes, I whisper to myself, “Listen to the waves.” And with these four words, this simple instruction, they appear: the waves emerge from the background to the foreground, and I hear them wherever I am—walking the dusty road, lying in a white-sheeted bed, hanging the laundry, even on the beach, because yes, it is possible to let your thoughts fornicate you over so thoroughly that you can be adjacent to the ocean, even inside or atop the ocean, underneath it or intertwined with it, and still not hear its constant mumbling voice. But just listen for the waves and there they are.

Back home, California is going through a drought worse than the one that haunted my childhood in the 1970s, the one that taught me that water is a kind of gold. Jittery with rejection, and surrounded by eerie cloudless skies, I had to get away from the couch, the bed, the books, the dishes, even the cats, because they were all indented with the weight of a man who didn’t want me anymore. It had been a short relationship, but it had come after a long dry spell, and I’d almost forgotten what it felt like to blossom, and then, so suddenly, to wither. If there is a God, he showed up immediately, through frequent flyer miles, a calendar with no work scheduled, and surfing friends sending an open invitation to stay at their rental in Costa Rica. I said yes, I said thank you. And ten days later I was flying into a place that was in the midst of its dry season, yet was greener than my California in its current attempt at a wet season.

I’ve been here to surf and stay with these friends three or four times over the past ten years, but on this particu-

lar trip at this particular time to this particular slice of the Pacific coast, the waves seem to disappoint everyone. They’re either too big or too small, or breaking too close to shore, or folding over all at once into foam that plasters onto itself and leaves no room to ride. All kinds of forces as elusive as clouds are conspiring to create these conditions, including storms in Asia and Africa, the slope of the beaches as altered by last season’s shifting sands, and tides, moons, planets, gravity, and various other laws of physics, geology, weather—and who knows, maybe even God. But for whatever reason, here in a region famous for waves—especially in winter, when it doesn’t rain but isn’t supposed to—the forces are not coming together as anyone wants them to. Sometimes, standing on the edge of the water wearing just a bathing suit and sunscreen, tying my board to myself with the decisive glue of Velcro, I look out at the massive walls of water thundering down or the tiny puckering wavelets soldiering against the opposing wind, and I say, loud enough for myself to hear, “Just don’t die.”

And sometimes I do in fact catch just three waves or just one wave, and I am satisfied simply to do that, and to do it without breaking my neck—something I have, in fact, done—or even breaking the surface of my skin, and to make it out of the ocean as smoothly as I got into it.

This is hard for a self-respecting surfer to admit, but the best session I’ve had here was the day when I gave up trying to paddle out to the waves and just bounced around in the white water instead. Truth be told, I did not even attempt to get to the waves, as the mere sound of them crashing told me to stay away. Carrying my board atop my head, I’d trekked with my four girlfriends and their boards along the concrete path from the dirt parking lot, listening to the water pounding on the sand. When I rounded the corner to the top of the dune, what I saw only confirmed what I’d heard: massive edifices of water, maybe only six feet tall, but thick, and long, stretching almost the length of the two-mile beach. It was not just the dimensions and the force of these walls that intimidated; it was the way they were breaking—jacking up and curling over. A surfer needs a wave to peel to the side as it breaks, exposing a glassy, rideable slope. Better surfers, especially those on maneuverable short boards, can handle sharper slopes, but all of us need some kind of shoulder to ride on. My friends and I stood on that hot sand for fifteen minutes, scan-

ning for a ledge, but the waves would not provide. Instead of opening up to smooth, they were closing out, folding over all at once with a thunderous boom and back spray that struck like lightning. And once they crashed, all that power converted into a wide bay of foamy white water.

Two of my friends were better surfers than I was. They groaned, they sighed, they cursed. Then they charged in, slipped onto their boards, and paddled long and hard to slog through that white water and out to the waves. The other two friends were beginners. They headed straight for the white water with the intention of staying there and practicing their moves. Though I’ve been surfing for fifteen years, I’ve learned my limits, negotiated with my ego, and come to the conclusion that having fun is more important to me now than facing down fear. So I swallowed my pride and followed the beginners.

The sun was nodding toward the sea, saturating the air with a postcard-golden light, and the silhouettes of chartered sailboats on their daily sunset cruises added to the idyll. My northern body is always and forever surprised at the absurd luxury of a warm ocean, and I got a whiff of giddiness just by wading in, floating my board beside me. The temperature was luxurious, but the current was belligerent, pulling severely to the south, a kind of liquid treadmill we had to push through in order to get closer to the waves. After fifteen minutes I was breast-deep, positioned in the immediate rumbling aftermath of the breaking waves, when one crashed down maybe twenty feet in front of me, then bubbled up into foam. I pivoted the surfboard around to face the beach, put my belly to the belly of the board, and let that gurgling white water of a broken wave—still plenty full of power—pick me up and carry me. Then I got to my feet and pretended to surf. Then I treadmilled back out, caught another faux wave, rode it in, went back out for another. Over and over I did this, getting giddier with each quick ride in and each laborious trek back out. For the first time in two weeks, I was out of breath from catching waves, out of my mind from dropping into my body, fully immersed in the elements of water and air, the effort and momentum, the whoosh and glide. Finally, finally, my moment of Zen, my moment of forgetting, my moment of fullness.

The Costa Rican sunset emerged as gorgeous as its cliché, and still I pushed through the current, then rode

back in on bubbles. The two beginners flopped around on their boards, almost as happy as me. The other two, the surfers who’d braved the waves and the arduous paddle out to them, stood on the beach, still wet with disappointment at having caught just one or two before declaring them unrideable and paddling back in. The light was going, and they wanted to get going, too. But first, I had to catch a few more rides.

Another admission: the tropics are both more seductive and more unnerving to me than the northern landscapes I know so well. The palm trees, the papayas, the Pilsen beer, the white sand, the black sand, the neon birds, the thin colorful sarongs we get to wear instead of clothes, the slow pace that the heat forces upon us, the absurdly warm water that makes wetsuits obsolete, the sheer amount of skin showing: the combination beckons and thrills with its foreignness, its sensual delights. But there is also the kind of pleasure that comes from a foggy chill in the morning giving way to sun, then returning in the evening; from hooded sweatshirts cinched tight over wet hair; from rocky cliffs scrubbed with dusty green coyote bush and flecks of bright yellow broom—simply because these are the sights and sensations that formed me, that grew me up. It’s that satisfaction that comes from surfing my home break, where I know the contours of the beach, its obstacles and its sweet spots, how it acts at each shift in tide and wind, and the tricks to getting in and out without getting bashed against the rocks. Perhaps this is the age-old contrast between the fever-pitched lure of the exotic, undiscovered, and possibly dangerous, and the low-throbbing bass of the familiar and safe, the comfort and contentment that come from intimacy, from knowing and being known.

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At fifty years old, a person should already have suffered every heartbreak she’s going to endure. Then again, she probably has no business falling in love again either. I’ve had more than my fair share of love affairs—the ones that build you up and the ones that tear you down—and at this stage I wonder if I’m a little greedy for wanting another go at it, for desiring one that sticks, one that shifts gracefully from the feverish to the familiar. I have learned the contours of enough men, discovered their sweet spots, found

the places where they shift and crumble, and where they lift and glide. Every time, I think I am ready to trade the whoosh of discovery for the safety of the known, the intimate. Then I remember, there is no safety in the known, either.

But the heart has a mind of its own, and I've never been able to talk it out of or into anything, not with a whisper, not with a shout. Some things come down from on high: We cannot make it rain; we cannot make it stop raining. We cannot grow the waves or flatten them. Even if we travel 4,000 miles, we may not get what we want; we may stand at the shore and wish for something other than what is. We may have to settle for less, and we may find that sometimes less is enough, that less provides all the giddiness we can handle.

A whisper is a kind of audible scribble, a note you write in sound, though on these hot beaches I am also writing notes to myself in sand, with the tips of pointed shells and branches. And yes, I am whispering to myself, also speaking to myself in whatever voice is between a whisper and a shout, even singing to myself as I walk, as I bob, as I veer into and out of sleep. I am doing anything I can to remind myself to listen and be satisfied.

Frances Lefkowitz (FrancesLefkowitz.net) is the author of *To Have Not*, named one of five Best Memoirs of 2010 by SheKnows.com. She has also published hundreds of articles, essays and stories in national literary and consumer magazines, from *Tin House*, *Glimmer Train*, *New World Writing*, *Fiction*, *Superstition Review*, and *The Sun*, to *Good Housekeeping*, *Natural Health*, *Martha Stewart's Whole Living*, and *National Geographic's Green Guide*. Honors include a Rhode Island State Council on the Arts Literary Fellowship, and special mentions for the Pushcart Prize (twice) and *Best American Essays*. The former Senior Editor of *Body+Soul* and the current Book Reviewer for *Good Housekeeping*, Frances also teaches writing workshops, and blogs about writing, publishing, and footwear at PaperInMyShoe.com.

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Simmering Silence, 2013
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