

THE SICK BED OF ALICE JAMES, 1892

Alice James was the sister of novelist Henry James and philosopher and psychologist William James. She endured an array of nervous disorders; She couldn't walk. She was described as 'going off', suffering spells of fainting or loss of consciousness. She said she had snakes inside her belly, a troubling churning sensation in her stomach just as she was falling asleep; her Doctors variously diagnosed her with suppressed gout, spinal neurosis, nervous hyperesthesia and spiritual crisis. In the spirit of the time she was considered an educated intelligent hysteric.

Alice kept a journal, hidden for 40 years after her death it was seen as heroic in its individuality and independence upon publication. She wrote witty terse social observations, and unusually, described her experience of her illness. She was diagnosed with end-stage breast cancer, which provoked in Alice a surprising liberating permission to take charge of her own death. Despite the interminable rapidity with which death approached, Alice didn't slip into the ideology of eternal life — her era's greatest coping mechanism against the prevalence of untimely deaths. She wrote subtle passages about the experience of pain entangled with woozy delight during repeated hypnosis and morphine with the "moonbeam personality" of Doctor Tuckey. She arrived at the perennial question of the nature of the self and where it resides even as the body fails part by part.

In the late nineteenth century, Alice James is a singular modern voice whose contribution is to give voice to the perspective of being inside an ailing body when very few did so. She reminds me - within my own ailing body - that rich perspectives and knowledge arise when you face the world with bodily doubt. Let the body beget speech. Act as a body *for* other bodies. Remember, we are all inter-dependent. She reminds us all that even within the most restricted circumstances it is possible to produce work of beauty and steel. - *I have a delicious consciousness!* Alice Said - *I was simply born a few years too soon.*