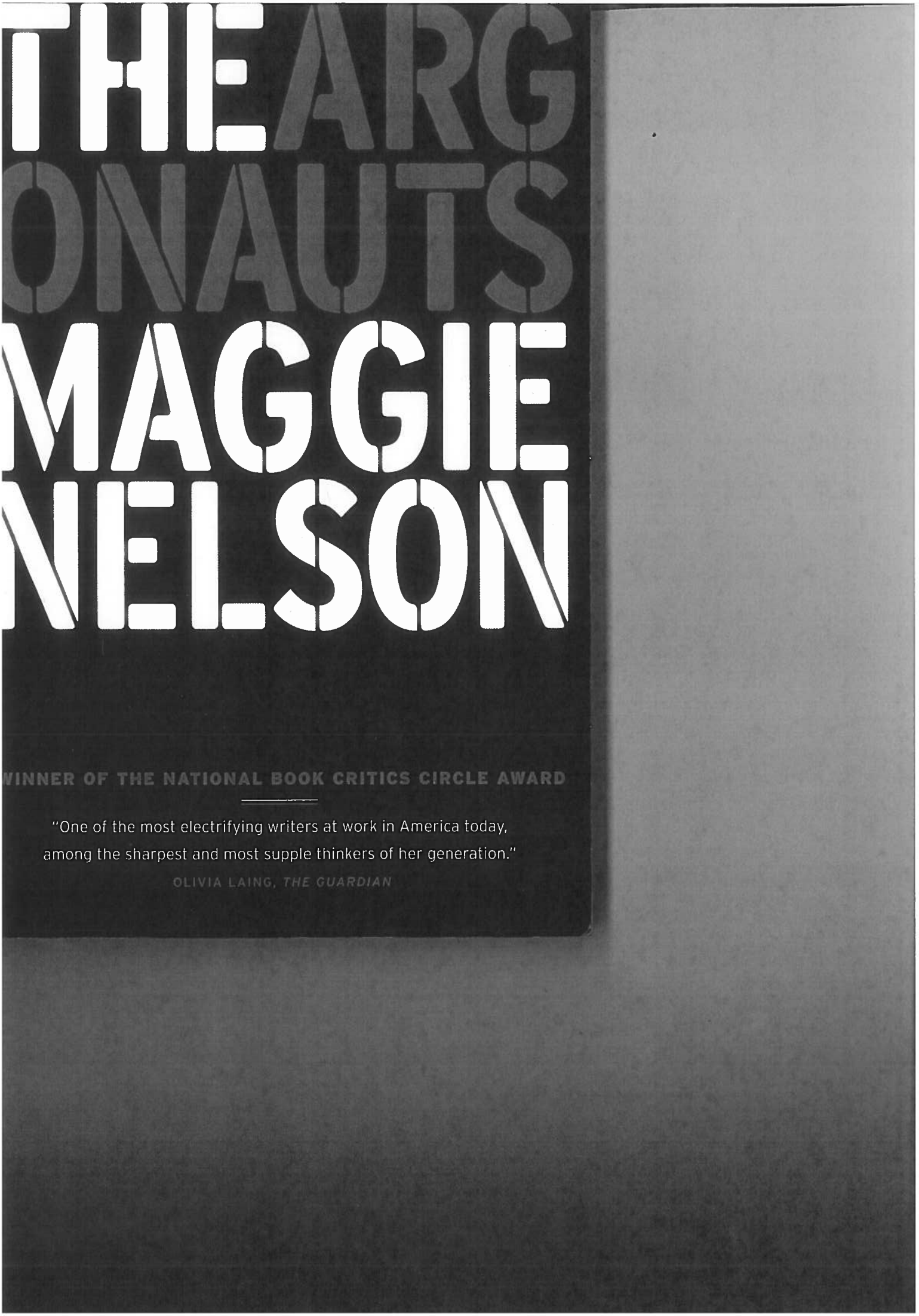
THE ARGONAUTS
MAGGIE NELSON
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Something Bright, Then Holes
The Latest Winter
Shiner

THE ARGONAUTS

Maggie Nelson

Graywolf Press

October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had *Molloy* by your bedside and a stack of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? *What's your pleasure?* you asked, then stuck around for an answer.

Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed. This idea gets less air time than his more reverential *Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent,* but it is, I think, the deeper idea. Its paradox is, quite literally, *why I write,* or how I feel able to keep writing.

For it doesn't feed or exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. It doesn't punish what can be said for what, by definition, it cannot be. Nor does it ham it up by miming a constricted throat: *Lo, what I would say, were words good enough.* Words are good enough.

It is idle to fault a net for having holes, my encyclopedia notes.

In this way you can have your empty church with a dirt floor swept clean of dirt and your spectacular stained glass gleaming by the cathedral rafters, both. Because nothing you say can fuck up the space for God.

I've explained this elsewhere. But I'm trying to say something different now.

Before long I learned that you had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds. You said that you knew this not from shunning language but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page. I argued along the lines of Thomas Jefferson and the churches—for plethora, for kaleidoscopic shifting, for excess. I insisted that words did more than nominate. I read aloud to you the opening of *Philosophical Investigations. Slab,* I shouted, *slab!*

For a time, I thought I had won. You conceded there might be an OK human, an OK human animal, even if that human animal used language, even if its use of language were somehow defining of its humanness—even if humanness itself meant trashing and torching the whole motley, precious planet, along with its, our, future.

But I changed too. I looked anew at unnameable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow. I readmitted the sadness of our eventual extinction, and the injustice of our extinction of others. I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

And you—whatever you argued, you never mimed a constricted throat. In fact you ran at least a lap ahead of me, words streaming in your wake. How could I ever catch up (by which I mean, *how could you want me?*).

A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase "I love you" is like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name." Just as the *Argo*'s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo,* whenever the lover utters the phrase "I love you," its meaning must be renewed by each use, as "the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new."

I thought the passage was romantic. You read it as a possible retraction. In retrospect, I guess it was both.

You've punctured my solitude, I told you. It had been a useful solitude, constructed, as it was, around a recent sobriety, long walks to and from the Y through the sordid, bougainvillea-strewn back streets of Hollywood, evening drives up and down Mulholland to kill the long nights, and, of course, maniacal bouts of writing, learning to address no one. But the time for its puncturing had come. *I feel I can give you everything without giving myself away,* I whispered in your basement bed. If one does one's solitude right, this is the prize.

A few months later, we spent Christmas together in a hotel in downtown San Francisco. I had booked the room for us online, in the hope that my booking of the room and our time in the room would make you love me forever. It turned out to be one of those hotels that booked for cheap because it was undergoing

an astonishingly rude renovation, and because it was smack in the middle of the cracked-out Tenderloin. No matter—we had other business to attend to. Sun filtered through the ratty venetian blinds just barely obscuring the construction workers hammering away outside as we attended to it. *Just don't kill me,* I said as you took off your leather belt, smiling.

After the Barthes, I tried again, this time with a fragment of a poem by Michael Ondaatje:

> Kissing the stomach
> kissing your scarred
> skin boat. History
> is what you've travelled on
> and take with you
>
> We've each had our stomachs
> kissed by strangers
> to the other
>
> and as for me
> I bless everyone
> who kissed you here

I didn't send the fragment because I had in any way achieved its serenity. I sent it with the aspiration that one day I might—that one day my jealousy might recede, and I would be able to behold the names and images of others inked onto your skin without disjunct or distaste. (Early on we made a romantic visit to Dr. Tattoff on Wilshire Boulevard, both of us giddy at the prospect of clearing your slate. We left crestfallen at the price, the improbability of ever completely eradicating the ink.)

After lunch, my friend who suggested the HARD TO GET tattoo invites me to her office, where she offers to Google you on my behalf. She's going to see if the Internet reveals a preferred pronoun for you, since despite or due to the fact that we're spending every free moment in bed together and already talking about moving in, I can't bring myself to ask. Instead I've become a quick study in pronoun avoidance. The key is training your ear not to mind hearing a person's name over and over again. You must learn to take cover in grammatical cul-de-sacs, relax into an orgy of specificity. You must learn to tolerate an instance beyond the Two, precisely at the moment of attempting to represent a partnership—a nuptial, even. *Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is—simply the outline of a becoming.*

Gilles Deleuze/
Claire Parnet

Expert as one may become at such a conversation, to this day it remains almost impossible for me to make an airline reservation or negotiate with my human resources department on our behalf without flashes of shame or befuddlement. It's not really my shame or befuddlement—it's more like I'm ashamed for (or simply pissed at) the person who keeps making all the wrong presumptions and has to be corrected, but who can't be corrected because the words are not good enough.

How can the words not be good enough?

Lovesick on the floor of my friend's office, I squint up at her as she scrolls through an onslaught of bright information I don't want to see. I want the you no one else can see, the you so close the third person never need apply. "Look, here's a quote from John Waters, saying, 'She's very handsome.' So maybe you should

use 'she.' I mean, it's *John Waters.*" *That was years ago,* I roll my eyes from the floor. *Things might have changed.*

When making your butch-buddy film, *By Hook or By Crook,* you and your cowriter, Silas Howard, decided that the butch characters would call each other "he" and "him," but in the outer world of grocery stores and authority figures, people would call them "she" and "her." The point wasn't that if the outer world were schooled appropriately re: the characters' preferred pronouns, everything would be right as rain. Because if the outsiders called the characters "he," it would be a different kind of he. Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new words *(boi, cisgendered, andro-fag)* and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up.* Like when I say *husband.*

Soon after we got together, we attended a dinner party at which a (presumably straight, or at least straight-married) woman who'd known Harry for some time turned to me and said, "So, have you been with other women, before Harry?" I was taken aback. Undeterred, she went on: "Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry." Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady? What did past relationships I'd had with "other women" have in common with this one? Why did I have to think about other "straight ladies" who were hot for my Harry? Was his sexual power, which I already felt to be immense, a kind of spell I'd fallen under, from which I would emerge abandoned, as

he moved on to seduce others? Why was this woman, whom I barely knew, talking to me like this? When would Harry come back from the bathroom?

There are people out there who get annoyed at the story that Djuna Barnes, rather than identify as a lesbian, preferred to say that she "just loved Thelma." Gertrude Stein reputedly made similar claims, albeit not in those exact terms, about Alice. I get why it's politically maddening, but I've also always thought it a little romantic—the romance of letting an individual experience of desire take precedence over a categorical one. The story brings to mind art historian T. J. Clark's defense of his interest in the eighteenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin from imaginary interlocutors: "Calling an interest in Poussin nostalgic or elitist is like calling the interest one has, say, in the person one cares for most deeply 'hetero- (or homo-) sexist,' or 'exclusive' or 'proprietorial.' Yes, that may be right: those may be roughly the parameters, and regrettable; but the interest itself may still be more complete and human—still carry more of human possibility and compassion—than interests uncontaminated by any such affect or compulsion." Here, as elsewhere, contamination *makes deep* rather than disqualifies.

Besides, everyone knows that Barnes and Stein had relationships with women besides Thelma and Alice. Alice knew, too: she was apparently so jealous upon finding out that Stein's early novel *Q. E. D.* told the coded story of a love triangle involving Stein and a certain May Bookstaver that Alice—who was also Stein's editor and typist—found all sorts of weasely ways to omit every appearance of the word *May* or *may* when she retyped Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation,* henceforth an unwitting collaboration.

#ThelmaMayNot

By February I was driving around the city looking at apartment after apartment, trying to find one big enough for us and your son, whom I hadn't yet met. Eventually we found a house on a hill with gleaming dark wood floors and a view of a mountain and a too-high rent. The day we got the keys, we slept together in a fit of giddiness on a thin blanket spread out over the wood floor of what would become our first bedroom.

That view. It may have been a pile of rough scrub with a stagnant pond at its top, but for two years, it was our mountain.

And then, just like that, I was folding your son's laundry. He had just turned three. Such little socks! Such little underwear! I marveled at them, made him lukewarm cocoa each morning with as much powder as can fit in the rim of a fingernail, played Fallen Soldier with him for hours on end. In Fallen Soldier he would collapse with all his gear on—sequined chain mail hat, sword, sheath, a limb wounded from battle, tied up in a scarf. I was the good Blue Witch who had to sprinkle healing dust all over him to bring him back to life. I had a twin who was evil; the evil twin had felled him with her poisonous blue powder. But now I was here to heal him. He lay there motionless, eyes closed, the faintest smile on his face, while I recited my monologue: *But where could this soldier have come from? How did he get so far from home? Is he badly wounded? Will he be kind or fierce when he awakens? Will he know I am good, or will he mistake me for my evil twin? What can I say that will bring him back to life?*

Throughout that fall, yellow YES ON PROP 8 signs were sprouting up everywhere, most notably jabbed into an otherwise bald and beautiful mountain I passed each day on my way to work. The

sign depicted four stick figures raising their hands to the sky, in a paroxysm of joy—the joy, I suppose, of heteronormativity, here indicated by the fact that one of the stick figures sported a triangle skirt. *(What is that triangle, anyway? My twat?)* PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN! the stick figures cheered.

Each time I passed the sign stuck into the blameless mountain, I thought about Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* from 1993, in which Opie photographed her back with a drawing of a house and two stick-figure women holding hands (two triangle skirts!) carved into it, along with a sun, a cloud, and two birds. She took the photo while the drawing was still dripping with blood. "Opie, who had recently broken up with her partner, was longing at the time to start a family, and the image radiates all the painful contradictions inherent in that wish," *Art in America* explains.

I don't get it, I said to Harry. Who wants a version of the Prop 8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?

Maybe Cathy does, Harry shrugged.

Once I wrote a book about domesticity in the poetry of certain gay men (Ashbery, Schuyler) and some women (Mayer, Notley). I wrote this book when I was living in New York City in a teeny, too-hot attic apartment on a Brooklyn thoroughfare underlined by the F train. I had an unusable stove filled with petrified mouse droppings, an empty fridge save for a couple of beers and yogurt peanut honey Balance bars, a futon on a piece of plywood unevenly balanced on milk crates for a bed, and a floor through which I could hear *Standcleartheclosingdoors* morning, noon, and night. I spent approximately seven hours a day lying in bed in this apartment, if that. Mostly I slept elsewhere. I

wrote most everything I wrote and read most everything I read in public, just as I am writing this in public now.

I was so happy renting in New York City for so long because renting—or at least the way I rented, which involved never lifting a finger to better my surroundings—allows you to let things literally fall apart all around you. Then, when it gets to be too much, you just move on.

Susan Fralman

Many feminists have argued for *the decline of the domestic as a separate, inherently female sphere and the vindication of domesticity as an ethic, an affect, an aesthetic, and a public.* I'm not sure what this vindication would mean, exactly, though I think in my book I was angling for something of the same. But even then I suspected that I was doing so because I didn't have a domestic, and I liked it that way.

I liked Fallen Soldier because it gave me time to learn about your son's face in mute repose: big almond eyes, skin just starting to freckle. And clearly he found some novel, relaxing pleasure in just lying there, protected by imaginary armor, while a near stranger who was quickly becoming family picked up each limb and turned it over, trying to find the wound.

Not long ago, a friend came over to our house and pulled down a mug for coffee, a mug that was a gift from my mother. It's one of those mugs you can purchase online from Snapfish, with the photo of your choice emblazoned on it. I was horrified when I received it, but it's the biggest mug we own, so we keep it around, in case someone's in the mood for a trough of warm milk or something.

Wow, my friend said, filling it up. *I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life.*

The photo on the mug depicts my family and me, all dressed up to go to the *Nutcracker* at Christmastime—a ritual that was important to my mother when I was a little girl, and that we have revived with her now that there are children in my life. In the photo I'm seven months pregnant with what will become Iggy, wearing a high ponytail and leopard print dress; Harry and his son are wearing matching dark suits, looking dashing. We're standing in front of the mantel at my mother's house, which has monogrammed stockings hanging from it. We look happy.

But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity? That my mother made a mug on a boojie service like Snapfish? That we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy—is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you miss it?

Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from—one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate

conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)? What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? *I'm a special—a two for one,* his character Valentine explains in *By Hook or By Crook.*

Judith Butler

When or how do *new kinship systems mime older nuclear-family arrangements* and when or how do they *radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship*? How can you tell; or, rather, who's to tell? *Tell your girlfriend to find a different kid to play house with,* your ex would say, after we first moved in.

To align oneself with the real while intimating that others are at play, approximate, or in imitation can feel good. But any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity,

Jacques Lacan

also has a finger in psychosis. *If a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so.*

Perhaps this is why psychologist D. W. Winnicott's notion of "feeling real" is so moving to me. One can aspire to feel real, one can help others to feel real, and one can oneself feel real—a feeling Winnicott describes as the collected, primary sensation of aliveness, "the aliveness of the body tissues and working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing," which makes spontaneous gesture possible. For Winnicott, feeling real is not reactive to external stimuli, nor is it an identity. It is a sensation—a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live.

Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity, as in *You make me feel like a natural woman*—made famous

by Aretha Franklin and, later, by Judith Butler, who focused on the instability wrought by the simile. But there can also be a horror in doing so, not to mention an impossibility. *It's not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex. Gendered selfconsciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature.*

Denise Riley

A friend says he thinks of gender as a color. Gender does share with color a certain ontological indeterminacy: it isn't quite right to say that an object *is* a color, nor that the object *has* a color. Context also changes it: *all cats are gray,* etc. Nor is color *voluntary,* precisely. But none of these formulations means that the object in question is *colorless.*

Butler

The bad reading [of Gender Trouble*] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism. . . . When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons,* presupposes *gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that "performativity" is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism. . . . Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.*

You should order a mug in response, my friend mused while drinking her coffee. *Like, how about one that features Iggy's head crowning, in all its bloody glory?* (I had told her earlier that day that I was vaguely hurt that my mother hadn't wanted to

look at my birth photos; Harry then reminded me that few people ever want to look at anyone's birth photos, at least not the graphic ones. And I was forced to admit that my past feelings about other people's birth photos bore out the truth of this statement. But in my postpartum haze, I felt as though giving birth to Iggy was such an achievement, and doesn't my mother like to be proud of my achievements? She *laminated* the page in the *New York Times* that listed me as a Guggenheim recipient, for God's sake. Unable to throw the Guggenheim placemat away (ingratitude), but not knowing what else to do with it, I've since placed it below Iggy's high chair, to catch the food that flows downward. Given that the fellowship essentially paid for his conception, each time I sponge tidbits of shredded wheat or broccoli florets off of it, I feel a loose sense of justice.)

During our first forays out as a couple, I blushed a lot, felt dizzy with my luck, unable to contain the nearly exploding fact that I've so obviously gotten everything I'd ever wanted, everything there was to get. *Handsome, brilliant, quick-witted, articulate, forceful, you.* We spent hours and hours on the red couch, giggling, *The happiness police are going to come and arrest us if we go on this way. Arrest us for our luck.*

Deborah Hay

What if where I am is what I need? Before you, I had always thought of this mantra as a means of making peace with a bummer or even catastrophic situation. I never imagined it might apply to joy, too.

In *The Cancer Journals,* Audre Lorde rails against the imperative to optimism and happiness that she found in the medical discourse surrounding breast cancer. "Was I really fighting the spread of radiation, racism, woman-slaughter, chemical invasion of our food, pollution of our environment, the abuse and psychic destruction of our young, merely to avoid dealing with my first and greatest responsibility—to be happy?" Lorde writes. "Let us seek 'joy' rather than real food and clean air and a saner future on a liveable earth! As if happiness alone can protect us from the results of profit-madness."

Happiness is no protection, and certainly it is not a responsibility. *The freedom to be happy restricts human freedom if you are not free to be not happy.* But one can make of either freedom a habit, and only you know which you've chosen.

Sara Ahmed

The wedding story of Mary and George Oppen is one of the only straight-people stories I know in which the marriage is made more romantic by virtue of its being a sham. Here is their story: One night in 1926, Mary went out on a date with George, whom she knew just a little from a college poetry class. As Mary remembers it: "He came for me in his roommate's Model T Ford, and we drove out to the country, sat and talked, made love, and talked until morning. . . . We talked as we had never talked before, an outpouring." Upon returning to their dorms in the morning, Mary found herself expelled; George was suspended. They then took off together, hitchhiking on the open road.

Before meeting George, Mary had decided firmly against marriage, considering it to be a "disastrous trap." But she also knew that traveling together without being married put her and George at risk with the law, via the Mann Act—one of the many laws in U.S. history ostensibly passed to prosecute unequivocally bad things like sexual slavery, but which in actuality has been used to harass anyone whose relationships the state deems "immoral."

So in 1927, Mary got married. Here is her account of that day:

> Although I had a strong conviction that my relationship with George was not an affair of the State, the threat of imprisonment on the road frightened us, so we went to be married in Dallas. A girl we met gave me her purple velvet dress, her boyfriend gave us a pint of gin. George wore his college roommate's baggy plus-fours, but we did not drink the gin. We bought a ten-cent ring and went to the ugly red sandstone courthouse that still stands in Dallas. We gave my name, Mary Colby, and the name George was using, "David Verdi," because he was fleeing from his father.

And so Mary Colby marries David Verdi, but she never precisely marries George Oppen. They give the state the slip, along with George's wealthy family (who by this point had hired a private eye to find them). That slip then becomes a sliver of light filtering into their house for the next fifty-seven years. Fifty-seven years of baffling the paradigm, with ardor.

I have long known about madmen and kings; I have long known about feeling real. I have long been lucky enough to *feel* real, no matter what diminishments or depressions have come my way. And I have long known that the *moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you.*

Ahmed

So why did your ex's digs about playing house sting so bright?

Sometimes one has to know something many times over. Sometimes one forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets again.

As with knowledge, so too, with presence.

If the baby could speak to the mother, says Winnicott, here is what it might say:

> I find you;
> You survive what I do to you as I come to recognize you as not-me;
> I use you;
> I forget you;
> But you remember me;
> I keep forgetting you;
> I lose you;
> I am sad.

Winnicott's concept of "good enough" mothering is in resurgence right now. You can find it everywhere from mommy blogs to Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Are You My Mother?* to reams of critical theory. (One of this book's titles, in an alternate universe: *Why Winnicott Now?*)

Despite his popularity, however, you still can't procure an intimidating multivolume set titled *The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott.* His work has to be encountered in little bits—bits that have been contaminated by their relationship to actual, blathering mothers, or by otherwise middlebrow venues, which prohibit any easy enshrinement of Winnicott as a psychological heavyweight. In the back of one collection, I note the following sources for the essays therein: a presentation to the Nursery School Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; BBC broadcasts to mothers; a Q&A for a BBC program titled *Woman's Hour;* conferences about breast-feeding; lectures given to midwives; and "letters to the editor."

Such humble, contaminated sources are surely part of the reason why, in Iggy's first year of life, Winnicott was the only child psychologist who retained any interest or relevance for me. Klein's morbid infant sadism and bad breast, Freud's blockbuster Oedipal saga and freighted *fort/da,* Lacan's heavy-handed Imaginary and Symbolic—suddenly none seemed irreverent enough to address the situation of being a baby, of caretaking a baby. *Do castration and the Phallus tell us the deep Truths of Western culture or just the truth of how things are and might not always be?* It astonishes and shames me to think that I spent years finding such questions not only comprehensible, but compelling.

Elizabeth Weed

In the face of such phallocentric gravitas, I find myself drifting into a delinquent, anti-interpretive mood. *In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.* But even an erotics feels too heavy. I don't want an eros, or a hermeneutics, of my baby. Neither is dirty, neither is mirthful, enough.

Susan Sontag

On one of the long afternoons that has since bled into the one long afternoon of Iggy's infancy, I watch him pause on all fours at the threshold to our backyard, as he contemplates which scraggly oak leaf to scrunch toward first with his dogged army crawl. His soft little tongue, always whitened in the center from milk, nudges out of his mouth in gentle anticipation, a turtle bobbing out of its shell. I want to pause here, maybe forever, and hail the brief moment before I have to jump into action, before I must become the one who eliminates the *inappropriate object,* or, if I'm too late, who must harvest it from his mouth.

You, reader, are alive today, reading this, because someone once adequately policed your mouth exploring. In the face of this fact, Winnicott holds the relatively unsentimental position that we don't owe these people (often women, but by no means always) anything. But we do owe *ourselves* "an intellectual recognition of the fact that at first we were (psychologically) absolutely dependent, and that absolutely means absolutely. Luckily we were met by ordinary devotion."

By ordinary devotion, Winnicott means ordinary devotion. "It is a trite remark when I say that by devoted I simply mean devoted." Winnicott is a writer for whom ordinary words are good enough.

As soon as we moved in together, we were faced with the urgent task of setting up a home for your son that would feel abundant and containing—good enough—rather than broken or falling. (These poeticisms come from that classic of genderqueer kinship, *Mom's House, Dad's House.*) But that's not quite right—we knew about this task beforehand; it was, in fact, one of the reasons we moved so quickly. What became apparent was the urgent task specifically before me: that of learning how to be a stepparent. Talk about a potentially fraught identity! My stepfather had his faults, but every word I have ever uttered against him has come back to haunt me, now that I understand what it is to hold the position, to be held by it.

When you are a stepparent, no matter how wonderful you are, no matter how much love you have to give, no matter how mature or wise or successful or smart or responsible you are, you are structurally vulnerable to being hated or resented, and there is precious little you can do about it, save endure, and commit to planting seeds of sanity and good spirit in the face of whatever shitstorms may come your way. And don't expect to get any kudos from the culture, either: parents are Hallmark-sacrosanct, but stepparents are interlopers, self-servers, poachers, pollutants, and child molesters.

Every time I see the word *stepchild* in an obituary, as in "X is survived by three children and two stepchildren," or whenever an adult acquaintance says something like, "Oh, sorry, I can't make it—I'm visiting my stepdad this weekend," or when, during the Olympics, the camera pans the audience and the voiceover says, "there's X's stepmother, cheering him on," my heart skips a beat, just to hear the sound of the bond made public, made positive.

When I try to discover what I resent my stepfather for most, it is never "he gave me too much love." No—I resent him for not reliably giving the impression that he was glad he lived with my sister and me (he may not have been), for not telling me often that he loved me (again, he may not have—as one of the step-parenting self-help books I ordered during our early days put it, love is preferred, but not required), for not being my father, and for leaving after over twenty years of marriage to our mother without saying a proper good-bye.

I think you overestimate the maturity of adults, he wrote me in his final letter, a letter he sent only after I'd broken down and written him first, after a year of silence.

Angry and hurt as I may have been by his departure, his observation was undeniably correct. This slice of truth, offered in the final hour, ended up beginning a new chapter of my adulthood, the one in which I realized that age doesn't necessarily bring anything with it, save itself. The rest is optional.

Bear Family: my stepson's other favorite toddler game, which took place in our morning bed. In this game he was Baby Bear, a little bear with a speech impediment that forced him to say B's at every turn (Cousin Evan is Bousin Bevan, and so on).

Sometimes Baby Bear played at home with his bear family, delighting in his recalcitrant mispronunciations; other times he ventured off on his own, to spear a tuna. On one of these mornings, Baby Bear christened me *Bombi*—a relative of Mommy, but with a difference. I admired Baby Bear's inventiveness, which persists.

We hadn't been planning on getting married per se. But when we woke up on the morning of November 3, 2008, and listened to the radio's day-before-the-election polling as we made our hot drinks, it suddenly seemed as though Prop 8 was going to pass. We were surprised at our shock, as it revealed a passive, naive trust that the arc of the moral universe, however long, tends toward justice. But really justice has no coordinates, no teleology. We Googled "how to get married in Los Angeles" and set out for Norwalk City Hall, where the oracle promised the deed could be done, dropping our small charge off at day care on our way.

As we approached Norwalk—*where the hell are we?*—we passed several churches with variations of "one man + one woman: how God wants it" on their marquees. We also passed dozens of suburban houses with YES ON PROP 8 signs hammered into their lawns, stick figures indefatigably rejoicing.

Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable).

At Norwalk City Hall there were a bunch of white tents set up outside and a fleet of blue Eyewitness News vans idling in the lot. We started getting cold feet—neither of us was in the mood to become a poster child for queers marrying in hostile territory just prior to Prop 8's passage. We didn't want to show up in tomorrow's paper next to a frothing lunatic in cargo shorts

waving a GOD HATES FAGS sign. Inside there was an epic line at the marriage counter, mostly fags and dykes of all ages, along with a slew of young straight couples, mostly Latino, who seemed bewildered by the nature of the day's crowd. The older men in front of us told us they got married a few months ago, but when their marriage certificate arrived in the mail, they noticed the signatures had been botched by their officiant. They were now desperately hoping for a re-do, so that they could stay officially married no matter what happened at the polls.

Contrary to what the Internet had promised, the chapel was all booked up, so all the couples in line were going to have to go elsewhere to get an official ceremony of some kind after finishing their paperwork. We struggled to understand how a contract with the so-called secular state could mandate some kind of spiritual ritual. People who already had officiants lined up to marry them later that day offered to make their ceremonies communal, to accommodate everyone who wanted to get married before midnight. The guys in front of us invited us to join their beach wedding in Malibu. We thanked them, but instead called 411 and asked for the name of a wedding chapel in West Hollywood—isn't that where the queers are? *I have a Hollywood Chapel on Santa Monica Boulevard,* the voice said.

The Hollywood Chapel turned out to be a hole in the wall at the end of the block where I lived for the loneliest three years of my life. Tacky maroon velvet curtains divided the waiting room from the chapel room; both spaces were decorated with cheap gothic candelabras, fake flowers, and a peach faux finish. A drag queen at the door did triple duty as a greeter, bouncer, and witness.

Reader, we married there, with the assistance of Reverend Lorelei Starbuck. Reverend Starbuck suggested we discuss the vows with her beforehand; we said they didn't really matter. She insisted. We let them stay standard, albeit stripped of pronouns. The ceremony was rushed, but as we said our vows, we were undone. We wept, besotted with our luck, then gratefully accepted two heart-shaped lollipops with THE HOLLYWOOD CHAPEL embossed on their wrappers, rushed to pick up the little guy at day care before closing, came home and ate chocolate pudding all together in sleeping bags on the porch, looking out over our mountain.

That evening, Reverend Starbuck—who listed her denomination as "Metaphysical" on our forms—rush-delivered our paperwork, along with that of hundreds of others, to whatever authorities had been authorized to deem our speech act felicitous. By the end of the day, 52 percent of California voters had voted to pass Prop 8, thus halting "same-sex" marriages across the state, reversing the conditions of our felicity. The Hollywood Chapel disappeared as quickly as it had sprung up, waiting, perhaps, to emerge another day.

One of the most annoying things about hearing the refrain "same-sex marriage" over and over again is that I don't know many—if any—queers who think of their desire's main feature as being "same-sex." It's true that a lot of lesbian sex writing from the '70s was about being turned on, and even politically transformed, by an encounter with sameness. This encounter was, is, can be, important, as it has to do with seeing reflected that which has been reviled, with exchanging alienation or internalized revulsion for desire and care. To devote yourself to someone else's pussy can be a means of devoting yourself to your own. But whatever sameness I've noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy.

My stepson is too old for Fallen Soldier or Bear Family now. As I write, he's listening to Funky Cold Medina on his iPod—eyes closed, in his gigantic body, lying on the red couch. Nine years old.

There's something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilization and its institutions (marriage, most notably) is met by the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions, and their frustration with the assimilationist, unthinkingly neoliberal bent of the mainstream GLBTQ+ movement, which has spent fine coin begging entrance into two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military. "I'm not the kind of faggot who wants to put a rainbow sticker on a machine gun," declares poet CAConrad. If there's one thing homonormativity reveals, it's the troubling fact that *you can be victimized and in no way be radical; it happens very often among homosexuals as with every other oppressed minority.*

Leo Bersani

This is not a devaluation of queerness. It is a reminder: if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us.

At the 2012 Pride intervention in Oakland, some antiassimilationist activists unfurled a banner that read: CAPITALISM IS FUCKING THE QUEER OUT OF US. A distributed pamphlet read:

> What is destructive to straight society—we know can never be commodified and purged of rebellion. So we maintain our stance—as fierce fags, queers, dykes and trans girls and bois and gender queers and all the combination and in be tweens and those that negate it all at the same time.

> We bid[e] our time, striking here and there and fantasize of a world where all of the exploited of the world can come together and attack. We want to find you, comrade, if this too is what you want.
>
> For the total destruction of Capital,
> bad bitches who will fuck your shit up.

I was glad for their intervention: there is some evil shit in this world that needs fucking up, and the time for blithely asserting that sleeping with whomever you want however you want is going to jam its machinery is long past. But I've never been able to answer to *comrade,* nor share in this fantasy of attack. In fact I have come to understand revolutionary language as a sort of fetish—in which case, one response to the above might be, *Our diagnosis is similar, but our perversities are not compatible.*

Perhaps it's the word *radical* that needs rethinking. But what could we angle ourselves toward instead, or in addition? Openness? Is that good enough, strong enough? You're *the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows.* And the thing is, even you don't always know.

Pema Chödrön

In October of 2012, when Iggy was about eight months old, I was invited to speak at Biola University, an evangelical Christian school near Los Angeles. Their art department's annual symposium was to be dedicated to the topic of art and violence. For a few weeks I wrestled with the invitation. It was a short drive away; in one afternoon of work, I could pay for a month of babysitting for Iggy. But then there was the outrageous fact that the college expels students for being gay or engaging in

homosexual acts. (As with the U.S. military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, Biola doesn't get bogged down with the question of whether homosexuality is an identity, a speech act, or a behavior: any which way, you're out.)

To learn more, I consulted Biola's doctrinal statement online, and there discovered that Biola actually disallows *all* sex outside of "biblical marriage," here defined as "a faithful, heterosexual union between one genetic male and one genetic female." (I was impressed by the "genetic"—très au courant!) Elsewhere on the web I learned that there is, or was, a student group called the Biola Queer Underground that emerged a few years ago to protest the antigay policies of the college, mainly via the web and anonymous postering campaigns on campus. The group's name seemed promising, but my excitement dimmed upon reading the FAQ on their web page:

> Q: What is The Biola Underground's stance on homosexuality?
>
> A: Surprisingly, some people have been unclear as to what we think about being both LGBTQ and Christian. To clear up this issue, we are in favor of celebrating homosexual behavior in its proper context: marriage. . . . We hold to the already stated standards of Biola that premarital sex is sinful and outside of God's plan for humans and we believe that this standard also applies to homosexuals and other members of the LGBTQ community.

What kind of "queer" is this?

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wanted to make way for "queer" to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation. "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant,*" she wrote. "Keenly, it is relational, and strange." She wanted the term to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of placeholder—a nominative, like *Argo,* willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip. That is what reclaimed terms do—they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive.

At the same time, Sedgwick argued that "given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term [*queer*]'s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself."

In other words, she wanted it both ways. There is much to be learned from wanting something both ways.

Sedgwick once proposed that "what it takes—all it takes—to make the description 'queer' a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person," and that "anyone's use of 'queer' about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else." Annoying as it might be to hear a straight white guy talk about a book of his as queer (do you have to own everything?), in the end, it's probably all for the better. Sedgwick, who was long married to a man with whom she had, by her own description, mostly postshower, vanilla sex, knew about the possibilities of this first-person use of the term perhaps better than anyone else. She took heat for it, just as she took heat for identifying with gay men (not to mention *as* a gay man), and for giving lesbians not much more than an occasional nod. Some thought it regressive that a "queen of queer theory" kept men or male sexuality at the center of the action (as in her book

Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire), even if for the purpose of feminist critique.

Such were Sedgwick's identifications and interests; she was nothing if not honest. And in person she exuded a sexuality and charisma that was much more powerful, particular, and compelling than the poles of masculinity and femininity could ever allow—one that had to do with being fat, freckled, prone to blushing, bedecked in textiles, generous, uncannily sweet, almost sadistically intelligent, and, by the time I met her, terminally ill.

The more I thought about Biola's doctrinal statement, the more I realized that I support private, consensual groups of adults deciding to live together however they please. If this particular cluster of adults doesn't want to have sex outside of "biblical marriage," then whatever. In the end, it was *this* sentence that kept me up at night: "Inadequate origin models [of the universe] hold that (a) God never directly intervened in creating nature and/or (b) humans share a common physical ancestry with earlier life forms." Our shared ancestry with earlier life forms is sacred to me. I declined the invitation. They booked a "story guru" from Hollywood in my place.

Flush with joy in our house on the hill, we were startled by some deep shadows. Your mother, whom I'd met but once, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Your son's custody remained unsettled, and the specter of a homophobic or transphobic judge deciding his fate, our family's fate, turned our days tornado green. You knocked yourself out to make him feel happy and held, set up a slide for him in our concrete sliver of a backyard, a baby pool in the front, a Lego station by the wall heater, a

swing hanging from the studs in his bedroom. We read books all together before bed, then I would leave to give you two some alone time, listen to your soft voice singing "I've Been Working on the Railroad" night after night from behind the closed door. I read in one of my stepparenting guides that one should take stock of the developing bonds in a new family not every day or every month or every year, but every seven years. (Such a time frame struck me then as ludicrous; now, seven years later, as wise and luminous.) Your inability to live in your skin was reaching its peak, your neck and back pulsing with pain all day, all night, from your torso (and hence, your lungs) having been constricted for almost thirty years. You tried to stay wrapped even while sleeping, but by morning the floor was always littered with doctored sports bras, strips of dirty fabric—"smashers," you called them.

I just want you to feel free, I said in anger disguised as compassion, compassion disguised as anger.

Don't you get it yet? you yelled back. *I will never feel as free as you do, I will never feel as at home in the world, I will never feel as at home in my own skin. That's just the way it is, and always will be.*

Well then I feel really sorry for you, I said.

Or maybe, *Fine, but don't take me down with you.*

We knew something, maybe everything, was about to give. We hoped it wouldn't be us.

You showed me an essay about butches and femmes that contained the line "to be femme is to give honor where there has

been shame." You were trying to tell me something, give me information I might need. I don't think that line is where you meant for me to stick—you may not even have noticed it—but there I stuck. I wanted and still want to give you any life-sustaining gift I have to offer; I beheld and still behold in anger and agony the eagerness of the world to throw piles of shit on those of us who want to savage or simply cannot help but savage the norms that so desperately need savaging. But I also felt mixed up: I had never conceived of myself as femme; I knew I had a habit of giving too much; I was frightened by the word *honor.* How could I tell you all that and stay inside our bubble, giggling on the red couch?

I told you I wanted to live in a world in which the antidote to shame is not honor, but honesty. You said I misunderstood what you meant by honor. We haven't yet stopped trying to explain to each other what these words mean to us; perhaps we never will.

You've written about all parts of your life except this, except the queer part, you said.

Give me a break, I said back. *I haven't written about it yet.*

In the midst of all this, we started to talk about getting pregnant. Whenever anyone asked me why I wanted to have a baby, I had no answer. But the muteness of the desire stood in inverse proportion to its size. I had felt the desire before, but in recent years I had given it up, or rather, I had given it over. And now here we were. Wanting, as so many want, the time to be right. But I was older now and less patient; I could already see that *give it over* would need to turn into *go get it,* and

soon. When and how would we attempt it, how much mourning would there be if we turned away, what if we called and no baby spirit came.

As concepts such as "good enough" mothering suggest, Winnicott is a fairly sanguine soul. But he also takes pains to remind us what a baby will experience should the holding environment *not* be good enough:

The primitive agonies

Falling for ever
All kinds of disintegration
Things that disunite the psyche and the body

The fruits of privation

going to pieces
falling for ever
dying and dying and dying
losing all vestige of hope of the renewal of contacts

One could argue that Winnicott is speaking metaphorically here—as Michael Snediker has said in a more adult context: "One doesn't *really* shatter when one is fucked, despite Bersani's accounts of it as such." But while a baby may not die when its holding environment fails, it may indeed die and die and die. The question of what a psyche or a soul can experience depends, in large part, on what you believe it's made of. *Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness: O so thin!*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In any case, Winnicott notably describes "the primitive agonies" not as lacks or voids, but as substantives: "fruits."

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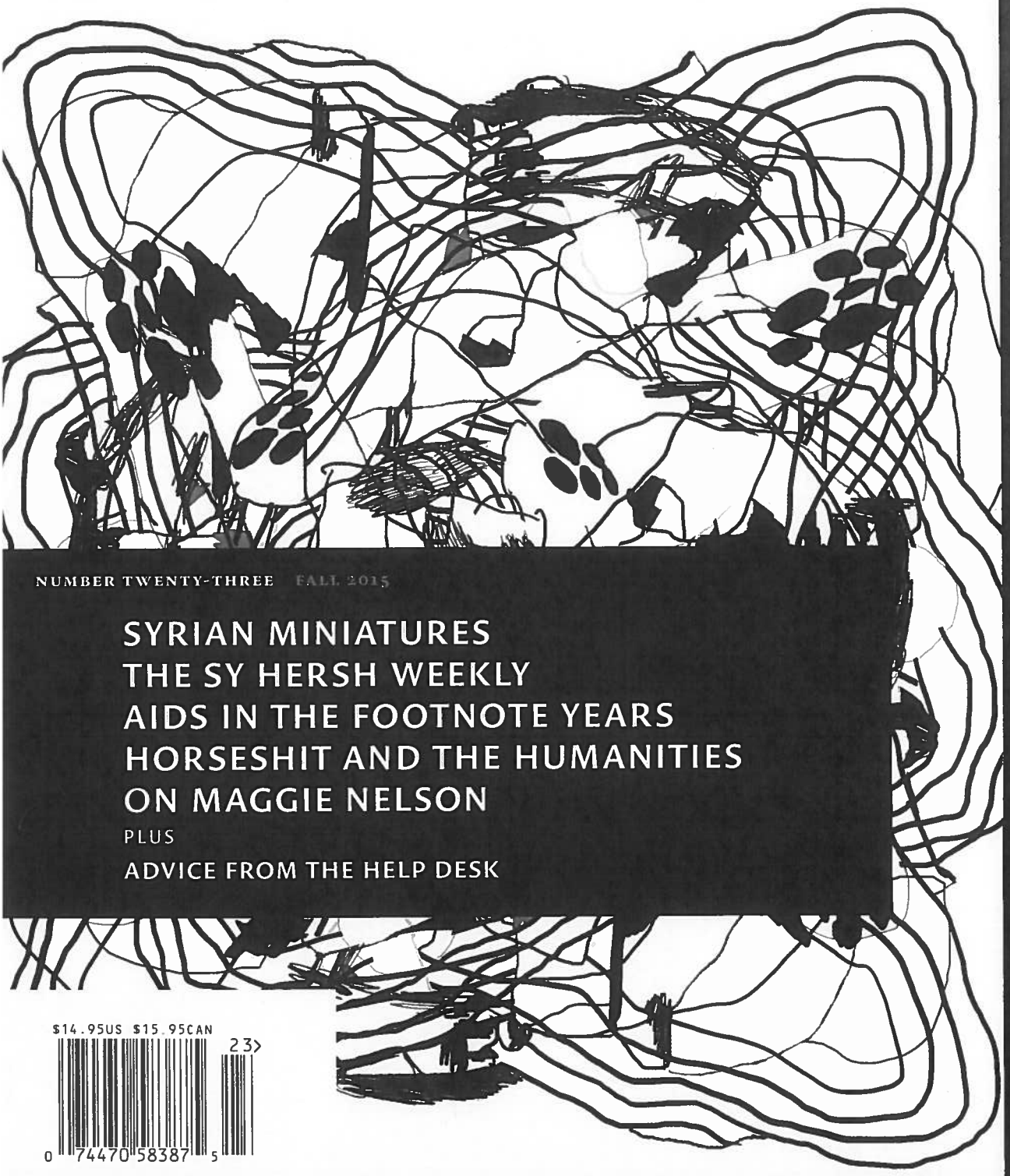

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MOIRA DONEGAN

Gay as in Happy

Maggie Nelson. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015.

IN CATHERINE OPIE'S 1994 PHOTOGRAPH *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, the artist poses in front of a black brocade curtain with the word *pervert* carved into her chest. The cuts are fresh: the letters are the five-alarm color of fresh blood, and the surrounding skin of Opie's clavicle is swollen and bright pink. The word is accented with another carving beneath it, in the shape of underlining laurel vines. In the portrait, Opie sits shirtless and straight-backed, with her hands folded demurely in her lap; her breasts hang down on either side like two great patties. Her face and neck are entirely obscured by a black leather fetish mask and collar.

Ten years later, in 2004, Opie took another photograph, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*. In that picture Opie is again sitting before a brocade curtain, this time a red one. She is naked, and cast in the saintly white light of a Hans Holbein painting, a cherubic blond child at her breast. In this photograph Opie is unmasked, and she and the baby are looking at each other. Neither of them seems concerned with the camera: in the picture, their gaze is very private. The scarred word *pervert* is faint but still traceable on Opie's chest.

In her book-length essay *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson is concerned with a dilemma she identifies in Opie's photographs. In the book, Nelson—a political queer in a relationship with the butch, male-passing artist Harry Dodge—becomes pregnant by artificial insemination and gives birth to a son. Along the way, in an episodic, nonlinear narrative, Nelson examines the difference between the subversive form she always assumed her happiness would take and the apparently conventional form that it does. What does one hope to achieve, she wonders, when one performs gestures like the one Opie did when she carved *pervert* into her chest? What are we signaling, and to whom, when we mark ourselves as different—as queer, as deviant, as angry or oppositional? Above all, how do we think our way out of the easy sense of contradiction that Opie's revisited image presents, between the pervert-self and the nursing-self?

The Argonauts arrives at a critical moment for queerness. The expansion of marriage rights and rapid cultural shifts toward assimilation and acceptance have rendered homosexuality much safer and less politically radical than it once was. For some queers, this has provoked a desire to preserve queerness's alterity: to evoke its history and mark it as fundamentally and

continually separate from the straight culture that surrounds it. It's an understandable impulse, given how quickly the LGBT movement has been embraced—and co-opted—by corporations, politicians, and other fair-weather allies eager to keep up with the times. But this impulse has a downside, too, as it risks becoming attached to its own idea of authenticity, the distinctions it makes between real queerness and queerness's supposed traitors.

"The tired binary that places *femininity, reproduction, and normativity on the one side, and queer resistance on the other* has lately reached a kind of apotheosis," Nelson writes, "often posing as a last, desperate stand against homo- and heteronormativity, both." She has no patience for this binary, which understands "procreative femininity" as a pollutant both of queerness and of radicalism; she sees the misogyny of this stance. If *The Argonauts* can be said to have a primary concern, this is it: how to resist a conception of queerness that shoehorns complex lives into a neat dichotomy of normative versus not, and how to resist the unhelpful demonization of motherhood, domesticity, and the other supposedly reactionary forms that love can take.

INCLUDING THE POETRY, *The Argonauts* is Nelson's ninth book. She's published two works of straightforward criticism: *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007), which originated as her doctoral thesis, and *The Art of Cruelty* (2011), an examination of brutality in contemporary art. In addition to *The Argonauts*, she has published two other works of what is most accurately called memoir: *The Red Parts* (2007), about violence in the media and the murder of her aunt; and the cult hit *Bluets* (2009), which used meditations on the color blue to weave together the story of

a breakup with that of the motorcycle accident that left her mentor, the feminist theorist Christina Crosby, paralyzed.

Like her other autobiographical books, *The Argonauts* is episodic, fragmentary, and pointedly acategorical: it's not a conventional memoir, but neither is it any of the other genres that it borrows from—not poetry, not scholarly criticism, not theory, not essay. There are no chapters, only paragraphs, which range from one sentence to two pages in length. Sometimes these form a sequence; at other times each stands alone as a self-contained thought. Mostly, the book tells the story of Nelson falling in love with, marrying, and raising children with Harry Dodge. It also tells the story of Nelson becoming a mother to the baby Iggy, a stepparent to Harry's son, Lenny, and a partner to Harry during a period of transformation: after nearly thirty years of wearing "smashers," even to bed—"doctored sports bras, strips of dirty fabric" that erase any visible trace of breasts—Harry decides to undergo top surgery and start taking testosterone. Harry's bodily transformation parallels Nelson's during her pregnancy, and both transformations hint at the title's meaning. Like the *Argo*, the mythological ship that keeps its name even as its parts are replaced, Nelson and Harry remain the same even as their bodies change. "On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more 'male,' mine, more and more 'female,'" Nelson writes. "But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging."

This is one way to narrate the arc of the book. It is accurate, but also misleadingly tidy: if *The Argonauts* eludes easy plot summary, it may be because the plot is not what anchors the book. What does instead is the character of Nelson's thought, which is warm, winning, sprawling, inexhaustible, and above all bent on a generous kind of self-improvement—one that doesn't dwell on personal failure so much as measure old ideas against new experiences, to test if they're still capacious enough, still flexible enough, to be true. Anecdotes become springboards for intellectual gymnastics, which Nelson performs without pretension; critical theory permeates the book, but she's not simply showing off her ribbons. (Nelson holds a PhD from CUNY, where she studied with the queer-theory heavyweight Eve Sedgwick; she now teaches at CalArts in Los Angeles.) Her style is vernacular, intimate, and practical: reflections on maternity, queerness, domesticity, and their representations derive from real questions that feel urgent because they are. A fondness for the psychologist D. W. Winnicott, for example, marks the distinction between theory that feels useful and theory that doesn't:

> In Iggy's first year of life, Winnicott was the only child psychologist who retained any interest or relevance for me. Klein's morbid sadism and bad breast, Freud's block-buster Oedipal saga and freighted *fort/da*, Lacan's heavy-handed Imaginary and Symbolic—suddenly none seemed irreverent enough to address the situation of being a baby, of caretaking a baby. *Do castration and the Phallus tell us the deep Truths of Western culture or just the truth of how things are and might not always be?* It astonishes me to think that I spent years finding such questions not only comprehensible, but compelling.

The italicized line comes from the gender theorist Elizabeth Weed, and it's one of many quotations Nelson works seamlessly into her text. These quotations are almost always rendered in italics, with the original writer's name printed in the margin in a pale

font. "I'm looking for a thoroughly digested way of thinking with other people," Nelson once said of this technique, and *digested* seems like the right word. The effect is that other people's sentences blend into Nelson's; they seem to belong there, as residents of her mind she must contend with.

There may be something deeper to this. Early in *The Argonauts*, Nelson quotes Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, a book that argues gender is not only constructed but built out of citations, references to images, movements, and behaviors of the past. (Think of the guy sitting spread-legged on the subway, with his knees pointing toward either end of the car: his unconscious citation is of the bowlegged cowboy—rugged, arrogant, and masculine.) It wouldn't be a stretch, given the nod to Butler, to read Nelson's method of citation as a way of constructing her identity as a writer: she cites Wittgenstein or Deleuze when she wants to be a philosopher, Dodie Bellamy or Eileen Myles when she wants to be a punk. That she is ambivalently and imperfectly all of these things is a part of her appeal.

But the citations fulfill a second purpose, of suggesting a kind of heritage. Weed, Winnicott, Bellamy, Butler, Myles, and the countless others Nelson cites—including Leo Bersani, Anne Carson, Pema Chödrön, Michel Foucault, and above all Sedgwick—are her "many-gendered mothers," she says, borrowing a phrase from the poet Dana Ward, and with Nelson's mind on maternity this concept has a vague but meaningful resonance. "I think of citation as a form of family-making," she has said, and *The Argonauts* is a project about queer family-making twice over: literally, as it tells the story of Nelson, Harry, and their children, and literarily, in its composition.

Moments of resonance, like this one, come often in *The Argonauts*. They arrive with the sudden force of an epiphany, but slip away just as quickly, leaving only a faint outline of sense. A more dutiful philologist could explain why this happens and how—*What trick of language does she use to conjure the feeling of meaningfulness so regularly?*—but it's enough to say it's an effect of Nelson's elliptical style. Fragments align, sometimes unexpectedly, creating a powerful sense of interconnectedness: the symbol of the *Argo* appears first in a quotation from Barthes about the phrase "I love you," then as a metaphor for Sedgwick's preferred vision of queerness ("a perpetual excitement . . . a means of asserting while also giving the slip"), then in reference to Michael Jackson's habit of replacing his aging chimpanzee, Bubbles, with "a new, younger Bubbles. (Cruelty of the *Argo*?)" A disagreement between Nelson and Harry about whether "words are good enough" is echoed by Winnicott's concept of the "good-enough mother," who mothers best when she's not overthinking it. What do these parallels, these echoes, add up to? Not nothing—but the answer isn't always obvious, and Nelson doesn't make it her job to make it so. "It is idle to fault a net for having holes," she writes on the first page of the book, and one could read it as a disclaimer: If a reader wants to plug up the holes in *The Argonauts*' net, she will have to do it herself.

The book's autobiographical elements are similarly evasive. When they arrive, they come out of order, as best suits the trail of Nelson's thought. First she and Harry are dating, but then just as suddenly they have not yet met, and Nelson is living in New York, instead of LA. We first meet their son, Iggy, as a baby in arms, with Nelson surprised by the color and specificity of her maternal love: "His thin hair is damp, smells like candy and earth, I bury my mouth into it and breathe." But just as quickly Iggy