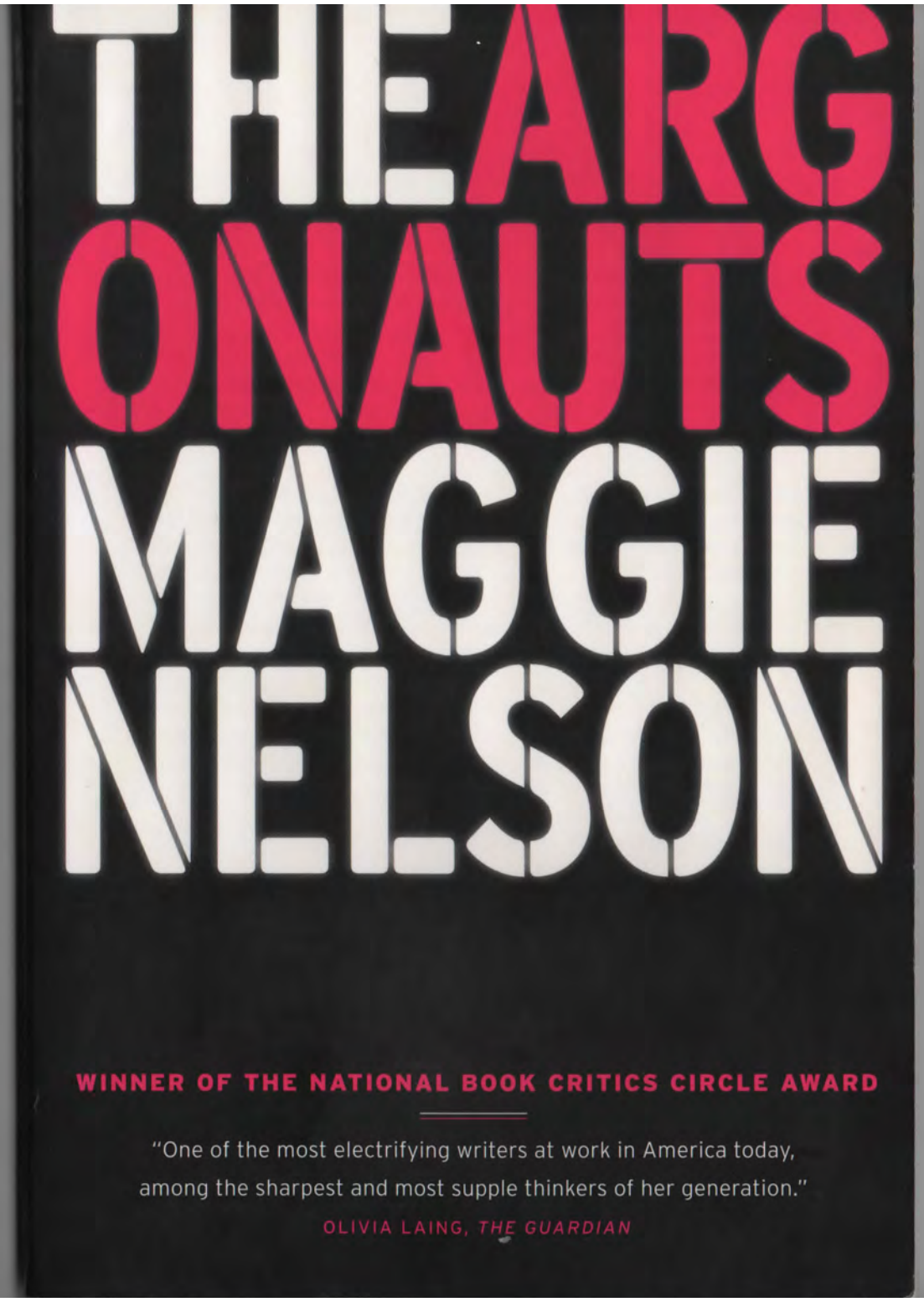
THE ARGONAUTS
MAGGIE NELSON
WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD
"One of the most electrifying writers at work in America today,
among the sharpest and most supple thinkers of her generation."
OLIVIA LAING, THE GUARDIAN

More Praise for *The Argonauts*

"Maggie Nelson is one of the most electrifying writers at work in America today, among the sharpest and most supple thinkers of her generation. . . . *[The Argonauts]* is about love and marriage, motherhood, pregnancy, birth and family-making, and because it is a book by Maggie Nelson, it turns every one of these concepts on its head. . . . Generative and generous, this is a book that belongs on the shelves of anyone who desires, especially if what they desire is nothing short of freedom itself." —*The Guardian*

"A book about using the writings of smart, even difficult writers to help us find clarity and precision in our intimate lives, and it's a book about the no less intimate pleasures of the life of the mind. . . . A magnificent achievement of thought, care and art." —*Los Angeles Times*

"Maggie Nelson slays entrenched notions of gender, marriage, and sexuality with lyricism, intellectual brass, and soul-ringing honesty." —*Vanity Fair*

"So much writing about motherhood makes the world seem smaller after the child arrives, more circumscribed, as if in tacit fealty to the larger cultural assumptions about moms and domesticity; Nelson's book does the opposite." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"A lushly poetic intellectual oasis. . . . Nelson weaves straightforward personal history with deeply intelligent meditations on what it all means. . . . A courageous, heady, poetic and irresistible book." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Nelson's hybrid book suggests a new path for the memoir. There's no need for falls from grace or stirring redemptions when you can look at life and death, as Nelson does, with a refined critical eye. It doesn't hurt that she speaks with the voice of a poet either." —*Vulture*

"One of my favorite books of the last few years. . . . In some ways, this book is a life-changer in that it posits new spheres of both being and togetherness." —Carrie Brownstein, *T Magazine*

"Nelson's vibrant, probing and, most of all, outstanding book is also a philosophical look at motherhood, transitioning, partnership, parenting, and family—an examination of the restrictive way we've approached these terms in the past and the ongoing struggle to arrive at more inclusive and expansive definitions for them." —NPR

"I read *The Argonauts* in one breathless, tearful, mind-blown day and I'm still recovering." —Miranda July, *Harper's Bazaar*

"The kind of book you feel desperate to share. . . . An important and impassioned book, one you will feel better for having read." —*Salon*

"Astounding. . . . If I had to chose a book for everyone I know to read, it would be this one." —*Bitch*

"Maggie Nelson explores the frontiers of thinking about love, language, and family, adding to a stunning body of work unconstrained by labels of form and genre." —*Poets & Writers*

"At once a work in the tradition of surgical critics of self and art like Susan Sontag and in a category of writing entirely new. . . . If you want to think—or better yet, to imagine—in ways you never before thought possible, read this book." —*Brooklyn Quarterly*

"This is a queer book in its softest heart, totally defiant and simultaneously full of love and a desire to connect with the world. This might all sound esoteric but the book is solid as a fucking rock: you'll devour it." —*Electric Literature*

"*[The Argonauts]* contains multitudes. It's a love letter to her fluidly gendered partner, the artist Harry Dodge. It's an appreciation of her favorite queer thinkers. It's a chronicle of first-time motherhood. It's also the best kind of nonfiction read, the kind that enlarges one's reading list by half." —*Lambda Literary*

"*The Argonauts* is deeply, personally and movingly about love. . . . A considered rejection of false choices, an intelligent, irritating, theoretical, intimate, funny, sad and exhilarating testament to the ever-fluid process of seeing out and getting out." —*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

"Nelson proposes a completely different way of looking at sex and sexuality, child-rearing and childbirth and everything else." —*London Review of Books*

"Warm, winning, sprawling, inexhaustible." —*n+1*

"What makes this book such a pleasure to read is Nelson's fierce intellect, which she thrillingly aims at the body. . . . Maggie Nelson is one of the best writers alive." —*Full-Stop*

"The very act of reading *The Argonauts* feels revolutionary." —*Barnes & Noble Review*

"[Nelson] writes beautifully about the deeply sensory, even sensual, joy that her child brings her, and about the difficulty of disentangling this mother love from other loves. . . . In its constant motion between criticism and memoir, *The Argonauts* is a thrilling realization of that effort so central to so many queer and feminist lives: the effort to live (with) our theory." —*Feministing*

"Reading Nelson is like sweeping the leaves out of your mental driveway: by the end of one of her books, you have a better understanding of how the world works. . . . The result is one of the most intelligent, generous, and moving books of the year." —*Publishers Weekly*

"A fiercely provocative and intellectually audacious memoir. . . . The author turns the whole process and concept of motherhood inside out, exploring every possible perspective, blurring the distinctions among the political, philosophical, aesthetic and personal." —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"Maggie Nelson cuts through our culture's prefabricated structures of thought and feeling with an intelligence whose ferocity is ultimately in the service of love. No piety is safe, no orthodoxy, no easy irony. The scare quotes burn off like fog." —Ben Lerner

"Once again, Maggie Nelson has created an awe-inspiring work, one that smartly calls bullshit on the places culture—radical subcultures included—stigmatize and misunderstand both maternity and queer family making. With a fiercely vulnerable intelligence, Nelson leaves no area un-investigated, including her own heart. I know of no other book like this, and I know how crucially the culture needs it." —Michelle Tea

"In the seventeenth century a book like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* might have been called an anatomy, by which I mean it's a learned, quirky, open-hearted, often beautiful naming-of-parts. The anatomy never forgets the fragile embodied world—its carnality or its finitude. Merely by describing her works and days, Nelson—like a kind of female Voltaire—could be said to wage staunch battle against the as-yet-undead forces of banality, stupidity, prejudice, and moral sloth." —Terry Castle

"There isn't another critic alive like Maggie Nelson—who writes with such passion, clarity, explicitness, fluidity, playfulness, and generosity that she redefines what thinking can do today. Nelson soars through art and philosophy and her own experiences with reckless mastery and insurrectionary ease—a virtuosity born of deep reflection and fearless trust in what literature, at its best, can do." —Wayne Koestenbaum

"Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* makes the socialization of the maternal function—the dispersed, dispersive essence of the futurity we present to one another until one is not another anymore—palpable as feeling and thought. There's the violence we commit in making a claim for that futurity, and the violence we endure when that claim is denied; there's the love story buried in every 'I love you,' and in every 'I love you' there's a contract for destruction and rebuilding; there's *The Argonauts,* which is one of the greatest books I've ever read." —Fred Moten

"What a dazzlingly generous, gloriously unpredictable book! Maggie Nelson shows us what it means to be real, offering a way of thinking that is as challenging as it is liberating. She invites us to 'pay homage to the transitive' and enjoy 'a becoming in which one never becomes.' Reading *The Argonauts* made me happier and freer." —Eula Biss

"*The Argonauts* takes us on a delicious journey into the real life intimacies and intricacies of queer love, sex, literature, and motherhood. Maggie Nelson's honesty, intelligence, humor and great writing transform what society might deem a radical, nontraditional lifestyle into the new desirable. A fucking gem of a book that touched and tickled all my sweet spots." —Annie Sprinkle

"In *The Argonauts,* Maggie Nelson turns 'making the personal public' into a romantic, intellectual wet dream. A gorgeous book, inventive, fearless, and full of heart." —Kim Gordon

THE ARGONAUTS

ALSO BY MAGGIE NELSON

The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning
Bluets
Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions
The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial
Jane: A Murder
Something Bright, Then Holes
The Latest Winter
Shiner

THE ARGONAUTS

Maggie Nelson

Graywolf Press

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for Harry

THE ARGONAUTS

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.

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.

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, 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.*

Jacques Lacan

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.*

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.*

Butler

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 stepparenting 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."

In 1984, George Oppen died of pneumonia with complications from Alzheimer's. Mary Oppen died a few years later, in 1990, of ovarian cancer. After George's death, several fragments of writing were found pinned to the wall above his desk. One of these read:

> Being with Mary: it has
> been almost too wonderful
> it is hard to believe

During our hard season, I thought a lot about this fragment. At times it filled me with an almost sadistic urge to unearth some kind of evidence that George and Mary had been unhappy, even if at moments—some sign that his writing might have ever come between them, that they didn't understand each other in some profound way, that they had ever exchanged ugly words, or differed on major decisions, such as whether George should fight in World War II, the efficacy of the Communist Party, whether to stay in exile in Mexico, and so on.

This wasn't schadenfreude. It was hope. I hoped that such things might have happened, and that Oppen, bobbing in the waves of bewilderment and lucidity that characterize a cruel neurological decline, would still be moved to write:

> Being with Mary: it has
> been almost too wonderful
> it is hard to believe

And so, shamefully, I looked. I looked for evidence of their unhappiness, all the while repressing the fact that my search reminded me of a particularly dysfunctional moment in Leonard Michaels's account of his tortured, explosive, and eventually disastrous relationship to his first wife, Sylvia. Upon learning that a friend had an equally horrible relationship with equally horrible fights, Michaels writes: "I was grateful to him, relieved, giddy with pleasure. So others lived this way, too. . . . Every couple, every marriage, was sick. Such thinking, like bloodletting, purged me. I was miserably normal; I was normally miserable." He and Sylvia marry; a short, miserable time later, she's dead from forty-seven Seconals.

Of course the Oppens fought and hurt each other sometimes, you said when I told you about my search. *They probably just kept it to themselves, out of respect and love for one another.*

Whatever I was looking for between George and Mary Oppen, I never found it. I did, however, find something I wasn't expecting. I found it in Mary's autobiography, *Meaning a Life,* which she published at the start of George's mental decline. I found Mary.

When I looked up *Meaning a Life* on Amazon, there was only one review. It was by a guy who gave the book a single star, complaining: "Purchased this book hoping to gain insight into the life of one of my favorite poets. Very little about George and a lot about Mary." *It's her autobiography, you fucking moron,* I thought, before realizing my trajectory had followed something of the same course.

Before the birth of her daughter, Linda, it turns out Mary suffered several stillbirths—too many, apparently, for her to give a number—as well as the crib death of a six-week-old. About all this, Mary writes:

> Birth . . . I think I am afraid to try to write of it. In childbirth I was isolated; I never talked about it even to George. He was surprised to learn that giving birth was a peak emotional experience and so entirely my own that I never tried to express it. . . . I would wish it to remain whole, and I have preserved the wholeness of my own experience of birth by not telling it; it is too precious to me. Even now, writing of the experiences of age twenty-four to thirty, I wish to encompass my isolation and the wracking devastation of loss, the sense of being a nothing on the delivery table, knocked out by anesthetic, only to regain consciousness and be told once more, "The fetus is dead."

George and Mary are famous for living a life in conversation, in poetry. *We talked as I had never talked before, an outpouring.* But here, Mary is unsure that words are good enough. *I never talked about it even to George.* Her experience may be one of devastation, but she still worries that words might chip away at it (intolerable).

Nonetheless, years later, as her husband begins to peel away from language, Mary tries to tell.

In his epic treatise *Bubbles,* philosopher Peter Sloterdijk puts forth something he calls the "rule of a negative gynecology." To truly understand the fetal and perinatal world, Sloterdijk writes, "one must reject the temptation to extricate oneself from the affair with outside views of the mother-child relationship; where the concern is insight into intimate connections, outside observation is already the fundamental mistake." I applaud this involution, this "cave research," this turn away from mastery and toward the immersive bubble of "blood, amniotic fluid, voice, sonic bubble and breath." I feel no urge to extricate

myself from this bubble. But here's the catch: *I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write.*

Winnicott acknowledges that the demands of ordinary devotion can be frightening for some mothers, who worry that giving themselves over to it will "turn them into a vegetable." Poet Alice Notley raises the stakes: "he is born and I am undone—feel as if I will / never be, was never born. // Two years later I obliterate myself again / having another child . . . for two years, there's no me here."

I have never felt that way, but I'm an old mom. I had nearly four decades to become myself before experimenting with my obliteration.

Sometimes mothers find it alarming to think that what they are doing is so important and in that case it is better not to tell them. It makes them self-conscious and then they do everything less well. . . . When a mother has a capacity quite simply to be a mother we must never interfere. She will not be able to fight for her rights because she will not understand.

D. W. Winnicott

As if mothers thought they were performing their ordinary devotions in the wild, then are stunned to look up, and see a peanut-crunching crowd across a moat.

Shortly after returning to work after having Iggy, I ran into a superior in the cafeteria. He gallantly purchased me my "vegan comfort meal" and a Naked juice. He asked when my next book would be out; I told him it might take a minute, as I had just had a baby. This sparked a story for him about a colleague

he'd once had, a Renaissance studies professor, who allegedly found her newborn so fascinating that for two whole years, her Renaissance research struck her as esoteric and boring. *But then, after two years, her interest came back,* he said. *It came back,* he repeated, with a wink.

Over time, I have come to suspect that my affection for *Bubbles* may have less to do with its endorsement of the rule of negative gynecology, and more to do with its ridiculous title, which it shares with Michael Jackson's pet chimpanzee.

Michael doted on Bubbles. But Michael would also rotate the chimp out of service as it aged, and replace it with a new, younger Bubbles. (Cruelty of the *Argo?*)

When I was growing up, my mother would sometimes tell me to switch the TV channel to a station with a male weatherman. *They usually have the more accurate forecast,* she'd say.

The weather people are reading a script, I would say, rolling my eyes. *It's all the same forecast.*

It's just a feeling, she would shrug.

Alas, it isn't just a feeling. Even if women are consulting the same satellites, or reading from the same script: their reports are suspect; the jig is up. *In other words, the articulation of the reality of my sex is impossible in discourse, and for a structural, eidetic reason. My sex is removed, at least as the property of a subject, from the predicative mechanism that assures discursive coherence.*

Irigaray's answer to this conundrum?: *to destroy . . . [but] with nuptial tools. . . . The option left to me,* she writes, *was to have a fling with the philosophers.*

In October of 1998, just a few weeks into my graduate school career, I was invited to attend a seminar with Jane Gallop and Rosalind Krauss. Gallop would be presenting new work, to which Krauss would respond. I was excited—back in college I had liked Gallop's heady, disobedient books on Lacan (such as *The Daughter's Seduction*); they evidenced a deep investment in Lacanian thought without seeming to have drunk the Kool-Aid. She was having a fling with the philosophers all right, but she seemed to be learning everything there was to know about the boiler room so that she could blow it up. Krauss's work I knew less well, but I gathered that everyone was invested in her theories about the modernist grid, and I liked the plain matte cover of *October* magazine. Didn't she write on Claude Cahun? I liked Claude Cahun. And busting the avant-garde's mythos of itself was, even then, my idea of a good time.

The professors gathered solemnly around a long wooden table in one of the more handsome rooms at the Grace Building, where CUNY was then situated. I felt as though I had truly arrived—somehow I had been plucked from the corner booth of Max Fish and deposited in the center of an intellectual mecca, complete with dark wood and academic superstars.

Gallop gave a slide show: her recent work was about being photographed by her husband, appropriately named Dick. I remember a photo of her with their baby boy in the bathtub, and one of her and her son lounging around together naked, Carole King–style. I remember being surprised and pleased that she was showing us naked photos of her and her son, and talking

unabashedly about her partner Dick (heterosexuality always embarrasses me). She was trying to talk about photography from the standpoint of the photographed subject, which, as she said, "may be the position from which it is most difficult to claim valid general insights." And she was coupling this subjective position with that of being a mother, in an attempt to get at the experience of being photographed as a mother (another position generally assumed to be, as Gallop put it, "troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned"). She was taking on Barthes's *Camera Lucida,* and the way in which even in Barthes—delectable Barthes!—the mother remains the (photographed) object; the son, the (writing) subject. "The writer is someone who plays with his mother's body," Barthes wrote. But sometimes the writer is also the mother (Möbius strip).

I liked that Gallop was onto something and letting us in on it before she fully understood it. She was hanging her shit out to dry: a start. She was droopy-eyed and louche in a way that I liked, and had that bad but endearing style that so many academics have—kind of stuck in the '80s, feather earrings, and so on. She even talked about how much she liked a shirt she was wearing in one of the slides—a black button-down with white bubbly scribbles all over it. I find it irresistibly interesting when people are cathected onto their bad style rather than simply oblivious to it (a description that may apply to us all; I sense the risk increases with age).

The slides were over, the talk was over, it was Krauss's turn. She scooted her chair up to the table and shuffled her papers. She was Gallop's inverse—sharp face, classy in a silk scarf, Ivy League, Upper East Side way. Feline, groomed, her thin dark hair in a bob. Kind of like the Janet Malcolm of art history. She started by saying how important Gallop's daring and thorough work on Lacan had been. This praise went on for some time.

Then, theatrically, she swerved. *The importance of this early work is why it is so deeply disturbing to behold the mediocrity, naïveté, and soft-mindedness of the work Gallop has presented to us today.* The color drained out of Gallop's face. Krauss ignored her, and went in for the kill.

The room thickened with the sound of one keenly intelligent woman taking another down. Dismembering her, really. Krauss excoriated Gallop for taking her own personal situation as subject matter, accused her of having an almost willful blindness to photography's long history. She alleged—or so I recall her alleging—that Gallop had misused Barthes, had failed to place her investigation in relation to any lineage of family photography, had punted on the most basic aesthetic concepts in art history, and so on. But the tacit undercurrent of her argument, as I felt it, was that Gallop's maternity had rotted her mind—besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting.

It's true that Gallop is no art historian, certainly not in the way that Krauss is. (Nor was Barthes, for that matter, but artistry trumps mastery.) And Krauss has always been something of a pugilist, just as Gallop has always been something of a narcissist—two perversities that proved, on this occasion, to be incompatible. But the lashing Gallop received that day stood for some time in my mind as an object lesson. Krauss acted as though Gallop should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating serious academic space with her pudgy body and unresolved, self-involved thinking (even though Gallop had been perfecting such contamination for years). But staging a fling with a philosopher was one thing; a pudgy mother in love with her son and her ugly scribble shirt was another.

I didn't have a baby then, nor did I have any designs on having one. Nor have I ever been what you might call a baby person (nor an animal person, nor a garden person, not even a houseplant person; even urgings toward "self-care" often irritate or mystify me). But I was enough of a feminist to refuse any knee-jerk quarantining of the feminine or the maternal from the realm of intellectual profundity. And, as I remember it, Krauss was not simply quarantining; she was shaming. In the face of such shaming, I felt no choice. I stood with Gallop.

In Arabic, the word for fetus derives from *jinn,* which means "hidden from sight." No matter how many ultrasounds you've had, no matter how well you feel you've gotten to know your baby's rhythms in utero, the baby's body is still a revelation. A body! An actual body! I was so in awe of Iggy's fantastic little body that it took a few weeks for me to feel that I had the right to touch him all over. Before Iggy, it always startled me to see a parent stuffing a Kleenex in the face of an unsuspecting toddler, as if a kid were just an object whose physical autonomy could be violated any time some stray mucus appeared. I wanted to attend to Iggy, but I didn't want to *ambush* him. Also, the culture's worrying over pedophilia in all the wrong places at times made me feel unable to approach his genitals or anus with wonder and glee, until one day I realized, he's my baby, I can—indeed I must!—handle him freely and ably. My baby! My little butt! Now I delight in his little butt. I delight in pouring water over his head with a toy boat full of holes, wetting his blond curls, matted with butter from a plate he recently made into a hat.

Luckily, Iggy couldn't care less. He is stalwart, has a high tolerance for physical intrusions. Within his first year of life, he withstood a spinal tap, several catheterizations, a contrast enema,

electric shocks, nuclear scans, countless IVs, and an infusion of rare antibodies harvested from other people's bodies (an infusion that, had we not had health insurance, would have cost $47,000 for the vial, an amount that puts the price of frozen sperm to shame). All that said, his native joy and robustness have continued, unabated. Until he grows too heavy, I carry him always and everywhere, even against the rules (making pancakes at the stove, walking down steep trails, etc.). When we go on the road together, I let him drag around my enormous rolly-bag at the airport, even though he's been ambulatory for only a few weeks. He insists. I recognize his insistence. I ignore the books that sternly advise against rocking or nursing your baby to sleep, so that she learns to go to sleep by herself; I am blessed with the time and the desire to hold Iggy until he slips off, and so I do. I wait and wait and wait until I hear a sleep rattle enter his breath, I watch his eyes flutter open and closed, open and closed, a hundred times, until finally they stay shut. I know from raising my stepson that this ritual won't last forever—Iggy's babyhood is already speeding away. By the time this book is published, it will be gone. Sturdy pilot, he flips over the coffee table and rides.

I adore Winnicott. But the perversity is not lost on me that the most oft-cited, well-respected, best-selling books about the caretaking of babies—Winnicott, Spock, Sears, Weissbluth—have been and are mostly still by men. On the front cover of *The Baby Book*—arguably one of the more progressive contemporary options (albeit oppressively heteronormative)—the byline reads "by William Sears (MD) and Martha Sears (RN)." This seems promising(ish), but nurse/wife/mother Martha's voice appears only in anecdotes, italics, and sidebars, never as co-narrator. Was she too busy taking care of their eight children to join in the first-person? I look down at my well-loved copy

of *Winnicott on the Child* and note that it comes laden with not one, not two, but three introductions by male pediatricians (Brazelton, Greenspan, Spock). What kind of bubble would burst if a lady shrink were presumed to add value to his legacy? Why don't I myself seek out child-care books by women? Am I unconsciously channel-surfing for the male weatherman? How could Gallop, or any mother, however whip-smart, present the rule of negative gynecology and be taken as seriously as Sloterdijk? I'm boring myself with these reversals (feminist hazard).

In Dr. Sears's *The Baby Book* there's a little sidebar (written by Martha?) called "Sexual Feelings While Breastfeeding," which attempts to reassure you that such feelings don't mean you're a pedophile freak. It says that you're basically hormonal soup, and because the hormones unleashed by breast-feeding are the same as those unleashed by sex, you could be forgiven for the mix-up.

But how can it be a mix-up, if it's the same hormones? How does one go about partitioning one sexual feeling off from another, presumably more "real" sexual feeling? Or, more to the point, why the partition? It isn't *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair.

Or, rather, it is romantic, erotic, and consuming—but without tentacles. I have my baby, and my baby has me. It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology. Even if I do feel turned on while I'm breast-feeding or rocking him to sleep, I don't feel the need to do anything about it (and if I did, it wouldn't be with him).

In the years to come, this affair will likely become unrequited, or so I've heard. All the more reason to hail the moment's autotelia.

It's so dark, this underspace, dark and sweaty. His thin hair is damp, smells like candy and earth, I burrow my mouth into it and breathe. I don't ever want to make the mistake of needing him as much as or more than he needs me. But there's no denying that sometimes, when we sleep together in the dark cavern of the bottom bunk, his big brother thrashing around on top, the white noise machine grinding out its fake rain, the green digital clock announcing every hour, Iggy's small body holds mine.

One of the most lovable aspects of Winnicott's writing on children (and on those who attempt to hold them) is his deployment of an "ordinary language" seemingly incapable of histrionics even as it discusses issues of maximum complexity and gravity. In his book *Queer Optimism,* Michael Snediker offers Winnicott's "nonironic denomination of adolescent depression as 'doldrums'" as an example of Winnicott's signature deflation-without-dismissal. "Easy enough . . . to wax lyrical on melancholy," Snediker writes, in reference to queer theory's long-standing preoccupation with melancholia. "Less easy to wax lyrical about 'doldrums.'"

One problem with lyrical waxing, as Snediker has it, is that it often signals (or occasions) an infatuation with overarching concepts or figures that can run roughshod over the specificities of the situation at hand. (Winnicott once accused Freud, for example, of using the concept of the death drive to "achieve a theoretical simplification that might be compared to the gradual elimination of detail in the technique of a sculptor like Michelangelo.")

Such accusations would not come as a surprise to many writers, especially to those who have attempted to pay homage, in their writing, to a beloved. Wayne Koestenbaum tells an instructive