

THE ARG ONAUTS 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*

Copyright © 2015 by Maggie Nelson

This publication is made possible, in part, by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund, and through a grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation Minnesota. Significant support has also been provided by Target, the McKnight Foundation, the Amazon Literary Partnership, and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. To these organizations and individuals we offer our heartfelt thanks.



The Argonauts is a project of the Creative Capital Foundation.

Published by Graywolf Press
250 Third Avenue North, Suite 600
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401

All rights reserved.

www.graywolfpress.org

Published in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-55597-707-8 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-55597-735-1 (paper)

6 8 9 7 5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015953599

Cover design: Jeenece Lee Design

THE ARGONAUTS
for Harry

October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widow makers 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.

And you—whatever you argued, you never mimed a constricted throat. In fact you ran at least a lap ahead of me, words stream-

ing 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 'proprietary.' 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 re-typed 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.

Eileen Myles

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 Fraiman

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 boogie 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 bumner 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 inva-

sion 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.*

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.

Ahmed

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."

Elizabeth Weed

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.

Susan Sontag

In the face of such phallogocentric 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.

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 mat-

ter. 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 weapon 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.*

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 betweens 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.

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 di-

sastrous 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 blood-letting, 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 child-birth 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.*

Luce Irigaray

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.

Q: If my husband watches me labor, how will he ever find me sexy again, now that he's seen me involuntarily defecate, and my vagina accommodate a baby's head?

This question confused me; its description of labor did not strike me as exceedingly distinct from what happens during sex, or at least some sex, or at least much of the sex I had heretofore taken to be good.

No one asked, *How does one submit to falling forever, to going to pieces*. A question from the inside.

In current "grrrl" culture, I've noted the ascendancy of the phrase "I need X like I need a dick in my ass." Meaning, of course, that X is precisely what you *don't* need (dick in my ass = hole in my head = fish with a bicycle, and so on). I'm all for girls feeling empowered to reject sexual practices that they don't enjoy, and God knows many straight boys are all too happy to stick it in any hole, even one that hurts. But I worry that such expressions only underscore the "ongoing absence of a discourse of female anal eroticism . . . the flat fact that, since classical times, *there has been no important and sustained Western discourse in which women's anal eroticism means*. Means anything."

Sedgwick

Sedgwick did an enormous amount to put women's anal eroticism on the map (even though she was mostly into spanking, which is not precisely an anal pursuit). But while Sedgwick (and Fraiman) want to make space for women's anal eroticism to *mean*, that is not the same as inquiring into how it *feels*. Even ex-ballerina Toni Bentley, who knocked herself out to become the culture's go-to girl for anal sex in her memoir *The Surrender*, can't seem to write a sentence about ass-fucking without obscuring it via metaphor, bad puns, or spiritual striving. And

Fraiman exalts the female anus mostly for what it is not: the vagina (presumably a lost cause, for the sodomite).

I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphysics, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking. I am interested in the fact that the clitoris, disguised as a discrete button, sweeps over the entire area like a manta ray, impossible to tell where its eight thousand nerves begin and end. I am interested in the fact that the human anus is one of the most innervated parts of the body, as Mary Roach explained to Terry Gross in a perplexing piece of radio that I listened to while driving Iggy home from his twelve-month vaccinations. I checked on Iggy periodically in the rearview mirror for signs of a vaccine-induced neuromuscular breakdown while Roach explained that the anus has "tons of nerves. And the reason is that it needs to be able to discriminate, by feel, between solid, liquid and gas and be able to selectively release one or maybe all of those. And thank heavens for the anus because, you know, really a lot of gratitude, ladies and gentlemen, to the human anus." To which Gross replied: "Let's take a short break here, then we'll talk some more. This is *Fresh Air*."

A few months after Florida: you always wanting to fuck, raging with new hormones and new comfort in your skin; me vaulting fast into the unfuckable, not wanting to dislodge the hard-won baby seed, falling through the bed with dizziness whenever I turned my head—*falling forever*—all touch starting to sicken, as if the cells of my skin were individually nauseated.

That hormones can make the feel of wind, or the feel of fingers on one's skin, change from arousing to nauseating is a mystery deeper than I can track or fathom. The mysteries of psychology pale in comparison, just as evolution strikes me as infinitely more spiritually profound than Genesis.

Our bodies grew stranger, to ourselves, to each other. You sprouted coarse hair in new places; new muscles fanned out across your hip bones. My breasts were sore for over a year, and while they don't hurt anymore, they still feel like they belong to someone else (and in a sense, since I'm still nursing, they do). For years you were stone; now you strip your shirt off whenever you feel like it, emerge muscular, shirtless, into public spaces, go running—swimming, even.

Via T, you've experienced surges of heat, an adolescent budding, your sexuality coming down from the labyrinth of your mind and disseminating like a cottonwood tree in a warm wind. You like the changes, but also feel them as a sort of compromise, a wager for visibility, as in your drawing of a ghost who proclaims, *Without this sheet, I would be invisible*. (Visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre.) Via pregnancy, I have my first sustained encounter with the pendulous, the slow, the exhausted, the disabled. I had always presumed that giving birth would make me feel invincible and ample, like fisting. But even now—two years out—my insides feel more quivery than lush. I've begun to give myself over to the idea that the sensation might be forever changed, that this sensitivity is now mine, ours, to work with. Can fragility feel as hot as bravado? I think so, but sometimes struggle to find the way. Whenever I think I can't find it, Harry assures me that we can. And so we go on, our bodies finding each other again and again, even as they—we—have also been *right here*, all along.

For reasons almost incomprehensible to me now, I cried a little when our first ultrasound technician—the nice, seemingly gay Raoul, who sported a little silver sperm-squiggle pin on his white coat—told us at twenty weeks that our baby was a boy, with-

out a shadow of a doubt. I guess I had to mourn something—the fantasy of a feminist daughter, the fantasy of a mini-me. Someone whose hair I could braid, someone who might serve as a femme ally to me in a house otherwise occupied by an adorable boy terrier, my beautiful, swaggery stepson, and a debonair butch on T.

But that was not my fate, nor was it the baby's. Within twenty-four hours of hearing the news, I was on board. Little Agnes would be little Iggy. And I would love him fiercely. Maybe I would even braid his hair! As you reminded me on the drive home from our appointment, *Hey, I was born female, and look how that turned out*.

Despite agreeing with Sedgwick's assertion that "women and men are more like each other than chalk is like cheese, than ratiocination is like raisins, than up is like down, or than 1 is like 0," it took me by surprise that my body could make a male body. Many women I know have reported something of the same, even though they know this is the most ordinary of miracles. As my body made the male body, I felt the difference between male and female body melt even further away. I was making a body with a difference, but a girl body would have been a different body too. The principal difference was that the body I made would eventually slide out of me and be its own body. Radical intimacy, radical difference. Both in the body, both in the bowl.

I kept thinking then about something poet Fanny Howe once said about bearing biracial children, something about how you become what grows inside you. But however "black" Howe might have felt herself becoming while gestating her children,

she also remained keenly aware that the outside world was ready and waiting—and all too willing—to reinforce the color divide. She is of her children, and they are of her. But they know and she knows they do not share the same lot.

This divide provoked in Howe the sensation of being a double agent, especially in all-white settings. She recalls how, at gatherings in the late '60s, white liberals would openly converse “about their fear of blacks, and their judgments of blacks, and I had to announce to them that my husband and children were black, before hastily departing.” This scene was not limited to the '60s. “This event has been repeated so many times, in multiple forms, that by now I make some kind of give-away statement after entering a white-only room, one way or the other, that will warn the people there ‘which side I am on,’” Howe says. “On these occasions, more than any others, I feel that my skin is white but my soul is not, and that I am in camouflage.”

Harry lets me in on a secret: guys are pretty nice to each other in public. Always greeting each other “hey boss” or nodding as they pass each other on the street.

Women aren't like that. I don't mean that women are all backstabbers or have it in for each other or whatnot. But in public, we don't nod nobly at each other. Nor do we really need to, as that nod also means *I mean you no violence*.

Over lunch with a fag friend of ours, Harry reports his findings about male behavior in public. Our friend laughs and says: *Maybe if I looked like Harry, I'd get a “hey boss” too!*

When a guy has cause to stare at Harry's driver's license or credit card, there comes an odd moment during which their cama-

raderie as two dudes screeches to a halt. The friendliness can't evaporate on a dime, however, especially if there has been a longish prior interaction, as one might have over the course of a meal, with a waiter.

Recently we were buying pumpkins for Halloween. We'd been given a little red wagon to put our pumpkins in as we traipsed around the field. We'd haggled over the price, we'd oed and ahed at the life-sized mechanical zombie removing his head. We'd been given freebie minipumpkins for our cute baby. Then, the credit card. The guy paused for a long moment, then said, “This is her card, right?”—pointing at me. I almost felt sorry for him, he was so desperate to normalize the moment. I should have said yes, but I was worried I would open up a new avenue of trouble (*never the scofflaw*—yet I know I have what it takes to put my body on the line, if and when it comes down to it; this knowledge is a hot red shape inside me). We just froze in the way we freeze until Harry said, “It's my card.” Long pause, sidelong stare. A shadow of violence usually drifts over the scene. “It's complicated,” Harry finally said, puncturing the silence. Eventually, the man spoke. “No, actually, it's not,” he said, handing back the card. “Not complicated at all.”

Every other weekend of my pregnant fall—my so-called golden trimester—I traveled alone around the country on behalf of my book *The Art of Cruelty*. Quickly I realized that I would need to trade in my prideful self-sufficiency for a willingness to ask for help—in lifting my bags in and out of overhead compartments, up and down subway steps, and so on. I received this help, which I recognized as great kindness. On more than one occasion, a service member in the airport literally saluted me as I shuffled past. Their friendliness was nothing short of shocking. *You are holding the future; one must be kind to the future* (or at least a certain image of the future, which I apparently appeared

able to deliver, and our military ready to defend). So this is the seduction of normalcy, I thought as I smiled back, compromised and radiant.

But the pregnant body in public is also obscene. It radiates a kind of smug autoeroticism: an intimate relation is going on—one that is visible to others, but that decisively excludes them. Service members may salute, strangers may offer their congratulations or their seats, but this privacy, this bond, can also irritate. It especially irritates the antiabortionists, who would prefer to pry apart the twofer earlier and earlier—twenty-four weeks, twenty weeks, twelve weeks, six weeks . . . The sooner you can pry the twofer apart, the sooner you can dispense with one constituent of the relationship: *the woman with rights*.

For all the years I didn't want to be pregnant—the years I spent harshly deriding “the breeders”—I secretly felt pregnant women were smug in their complaints. Here they were, sitting on top of the cake of the culture, getting all the kudos for doing exactly what women are supposed to do, yet still they felt unsupported and discriminated against. Give me a break! Then, when I wanted to be pregnant but wasn't, I felt that pregnant women had the cake I wanted, and were busy bitching about the flavor of the icing.

I was wrong on all counts—imprisoned, as I was and still am, by my own hopes and fears. I'm not trying to fix that wrongness here. I'm just trying to let it *hang out*.

Place me now, like a pregnant cutout doll, at a “prestigious New York university,” giving a talk on my book on cruelty.

During the Q&A, a well-known playwright raises his hand and says: *I can't help but notice that you're with child, which leads me to the question—how did you handle working on all this dark material [sadism, masochism, cruelty, violence, and so on] in your condition?*

Ah yes, I think, digging a knee into the podium. Leave it to the old patrician white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body, so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, *a woman who thinks*.

As if anyone was missing the spectacle anyway. As if a similar scene didn't recur at nearly every location of my so-called book tour. As if when I myself see pregnant women in the public sphere, there isn't a kind of drumming in my mind that threatens to drown out all else: *pregnant, pregnant, pregnant*, perhaps because the soul (or souls) in utero is pumping out static, static that disrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two.

During irritating Q&As, bumpy takeoffs and landings, and frightful faculty meetings, I placed my hands on my risen belly and attempted silent communion with the being spinning in the murk. Wherever I went, there the baby went, too. Hello New York! Hello bathtub! And yet babies have a will of their own, which becomes visible the first time mine sticks out a limb and makes a tent of my belly. During the night he gets into weird positions, forcing me to plead, *Move along, little baby! Get your foot off my lungs!* And if you are tracking a problem, as I was, you may have to watch the baby's body develop in ways that might harm him, with nothing you can do about it. Powerlessness, finitude, endurance. You are making the baby,

but not *directly*. You are responsible for his welfare, but unable to control the core elements. You must allow him to unfurl, you must feed his unfurling, you must hold him. But he will unfurl as his cells are programmed to unfurl. You can't reverse an unfolding structural or chromosomal disturbance by ingesting the right organic tea.

Why do we have to measure his kidneys and freak out about their size every week if we've already decided we are not going to take him out early or do anything to treat him until after he's born? I asked the doctor rolling the sticky ultrasound shaft over my belly for seemingly the thousandth time. *Well, most mothers want to know as much as possible about the condition of their babies*, she said, avoiding my eyes.

Truth be told, when we first started trying to conceive, I had hoped to be done with my cruelty project and onto something "cheerier," so that the baby might have more upbeat accompaniment in utero. But I needn't have worried—not only did getting pregnant take much longer than I'd wanted it to, but pregnancy itself taught me how irrelevant such a hope was. Babies grow in a helix of hope and fear; gestating draws one but deeper into the spiral. It isn't cruel in there, but it's dark. I would have explained this to the playwright, but he had already left the room.

After the Q&A at this event, a woman came up to me and told me that she just got out of a relationship with a woman who had wanted her to hit her during sex. *She was so fucked up*, she said. *Came from a background of abuse. I had to tell her I couldn't do that to her, I could never be that person.* She seemed to be asking

me for a species of advice, so I told her the only thing that occurred to me: I didn't know this other woman, so all that seemed clear to me was that their perversities were not compatible.

Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people. This is a crucial point to remember, and also a difficult one. It reminds us that there is difference right where we may be looking for, and expecting, communion.

Sedgwick

At twenty-eight weeks, I was hospitalized for some bleeding. While discussing a possible placental issue, one doctor quipped, "We don't want that, because while that would likely be OK for the baby, it might not be OK for you." By pressing a bit, I figured out that she meant, in that particular scenario, the baby would likely live, but I might not.

Now, I loved my hard-won baby-to-be fiercely, but I was in no way ready to bow out of this vale of tears for his survival. Nor do I think those who love me would have looked too kindly on such a decision—a decision that doctors elsewhere on the globe are mandated to make, and that the die-hard antiabortionists are going for here.

Once I was riding in a cab to JFK, passing by that amazingly overpacked cemetery along the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (Calvary?). My cabdriver gazed out wistfully at the headstones packed onto the hill and said, *Many of those graves are the graves of children. Likely so*, I returned with a measure of fatigued trepidation, the result of years of fielding unwanted monologues from cabdrivers about how women should live or behave. *It is a good thing when children die*, he said. *They go straight to Paradise, because they are the innocents.*

During my sleepless night under placental observation, this monologue came back to me. And I wondered if, instead of working to fulfill the dream of worldwide enforced childbearing, abortion foes could instead get excited about all the innocent, unborn souls going straight from the abortion table to Paradise, no detour necessary into this den of iniquity, which eventually makes whores of us all (not to mention Social Security recipients). Could that get them off our backs once and for all?

Never in my life have I felt more prochoice than when I was pregnant. And never in my life have I understood more thoroughly, and been more excited about, a life that began at conception. Feminists may never make a bumper sticker that says IT'S A CHOICE AND A CHILD, but of course that's what it is, and we know it. We don't need to wait for George Carlin to spill the beans. We're not idiots; we understand the stakes. Sometimes we choose death. Harry and I sometimes joke that women should get way beyond twenty weeks—maybe even up to two days after birth—to decide if they want to keep the baby. (Joke, OK?)

I have saved many mementos for Iggy, but I admit to tossing away an envelope with about twenty-five ultrasound photos of his in-utero penis and testicles, which a chirpy, blond pony-tailed technician printed out for me every time I had an ultrasound. *Boy, he's sure proud of his stuff*, she would say, before jabbing Print. Or, *He really likes to show it off!*

Just let him wheel around in his sac for Christ's sake, I thought, grimly folding the genital triptychs into my wallet, week after week. Let him stay oblivious—for the first and last time, perhaps—to the task of performing a self for others, to the fact

that we develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (*Argo*).

I guess the cheery way of looking at this snowball would be to say, subjectivity is keenly relational, and it is strange. *We are for another, or by virtue of another*. In my final weeks, I walked every day in the Arroyo Seco, listing aloud all the people who were waiting on earth to love Iggy, hoping that the promise of their love would eventually be enough to lure him out.

As my due date neared, I confided in Jessica, the woman who would be assisting our birth, that I was worried I wouldn't be able to make milk, as I had heard of women who couldn't. She smiled and said, *You've made it already*. Seeing me unconvinced, she said, *Want me to show you?* I nodded, shyly lifting a breast out of my bra. In one stunning gesture, she took my breast into her hand-beak and clamped down hard. A bloom of custard-colored drops rose in a ring, indifferent to my doubts.

According to Kaja Silverman, the turn to a paternal God comes on the heels of the child's recognition that the mother cannot protect against all harm, that her milk—be it literal or figurative—doesn't solve all problems. As the human mother proves herself a separate, finite entity, she disappoints, and gravely. In its rage at maternal finitude, the child turns to an all-powerful patriarch—God—who, by definition, cannot let anyone down. "The extraordinarily difficult task imposed upon the child's primary caretaker not only by the culture but also by Being itself is to induct it into relationality by saying over and over again, in a multitude of ways, what death will otherwise have to teach it: 'This is where you end and others begin.'

Unfortunately, this lesson seldom 'takes,' and the mother usually delivers it at enormous cost to herself. Most children respond to the partial satisfaction of their demands with extreme rage, rage that is predicated on the belief that the mother is withholding something that is within her power to provide."

I get that if the caretaker does not teach the lesson of the "me" and the "not-me" to the child, she may not make adequate space for herself. But why does the delivery of this lesson come at such an enormous cost? What is the cost? Withstanding a child's rage? Isn't a child's rage something we should be able to withstand?

Silverman also contends that a baby's demands on the mother can be "very flattering to the mother's narcissism, since it attributes to her the capacity to satisfy her infant's lack, and so—by extension—her own. Since most women in our culture are egoically wounded, the temptation to bathe in the sun of this idealization often proves irresistible." I have seen some mothers use their babies to fill a lack, or soothe an egoic wound, or bathe in the sun of idealization in ways that seemed pathological. But for the most part those people were pathological prior to having a baby. They would have had a pathological relation to carrot juice. Remnant Lacanian that she is, Silverman's aperture does not seem wide enough to include an enjoyment that doesn't derive from filling a void, or love that is not merely balm for a wound. So far as I can tell, most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying oneself. Some would call that an ethics.

Silverman does imagine, however, that this cycle could or should change: "Our culture should support [the mother] by providing enabling representations of maternal finitude, but instead it keeps alive in all of us the tacit belief that [the mother] *could*

satisfy our desires if she really *wanted to*." What would these "enabling representations" look like? Better parts for women in Hollywood movies? Books like this one? I don't want to represent anything.

At the same time, every word that I write could be read as some kind of defense, or assertion of value, of whatever it is that I am, whatever viewpoint it is that I ostensibly have to offer, whatever I've lived. *You know so much about people from the second they open their mouths. Right away you might know that you might want to keep them out.* That's part of the horror of speaking, of writing. There is nowhere to hide. When you try to hide, the spectacle can grow grotesque. Think of Joan Didion's preemptive attempt, in *Blue Nights*, to quash any notion that her daughter Quintana Roo's childhood was a privileged one. "'Privilege' is a judgment. 'Privilege' is an opinion. 'Privilege' is an accusation. 'Privilege' remains an area to which—when I think of what [Quintana] endured, when I consider what came later—I will not easily cop." These remarks were a pity, since her account of "what came later"—Quintana's death, on the heels of the death of Didion's beloved husband—underscores Didion's more interesting, albeit disavowed subject, which is that economic privilege does not protect against all suffering.

I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth. I would also like to cop easily to my abundant privilege—except that the notion of privilege as something to which one could "easily cop," as in "cop to once and be done with," is ridiculous. Privilege *saturates*, privilege *structures*. But I have also never been less interested in arguing for the rightness, much less the righteousness, of any particular position or orientation. *What other reason is there for writing than to be traitor to one's own*

Eileen Myles

Deleuze/Parnet

reign, traitor to one's own sex, to one's class, to one's majority? And to be traitor to writing.

Afraid of assertion. Always trying to get out of "totalizing" language, i.e., language that rides roughshod over specificity; realizing this is another form of paranoia. Barthes found the exit to this merry-go-round by reminding himself that "it is language which is assertive, not he." It is absurd, Barthes says, to try to flee from language's assertive nature by "add[ing] to each sentence some little phrase of uncertainty, as if anything that came out of language could make language tremble."

My writing is riddled with such tics of uncertainty. I have no excuse or solution, save to allow myself the tremblings, then go back in later and slash them out. In this way I edit myself into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to me.

At times I grow tired of this approach, and all its gendered baggage. Over the years I've had to train myself to wipe the *sorry* off almost every work e-mail I write; otherwise, each might begin, Sorry for the delay, Sorry for the confusion, Sorry for *whatever*. *One only has to read interviews with outstanding women to hear them apologizing.* But I don't intend to denigrate the power of apology: I keep in my *sorry* when I really mean it. And certainly there are many speakers whom I'd like to see do more trembling, more unknowing, more apologizing.

While beholding Steiner's *Puppies and Babies*, I couldn't help but think of Nan Goldin's 1986 "visual diary," *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*—another series of photographs that bears witness to the friends, lovers, and exes that make up the photog-

rapher's tribe. As the titles of the two works suggest, however, their moods differ sharply. One of the most Goldinesque photos in *Puppies and Babies* is an interior shot, just out of focus, of dancer Layla Childs (Steiner's ex), half-dressed and staring blankly at the camera, bathed in a dim red light. But instead of sporting a tear-stained face or bruises from a recent battering, à la *Ballad*, Childs is pumping milk from her breasts via a "hands free" pumping bra and double electric pump.

Pumping milk is, for many women, a sharply private activity. It can also be physically and emotionally challenging, as it reminds the nursing mother of her animal status: just another mammal, milk being siphoned from its glands. Beyond photographs in breast pump manuals (and lactation porn), however, images of milk expression are really nowhere to be found. Phrases such as *colostrum*, *letdown*, and *hindmilk* arrive in one's life like hieroglyphs from the land of the lost. So the presence of Steiner's camera here—and the steadfast stare of her subject—feels jarring and exciting. This is especially so when you consider how photographers such as Goldin (or Ryan McGinley, or Richard Billingham, or Larry Clark, or Peter Hujar, or Zoe Strauss) often make us feel as though we have glimpsed something radically intimate by evoking danger, suffering, illness, nihilism, or abjection. In Steiner's intimate portrait of Childs, the proposed transmission of fluids is about nourishment. *I almost can't imagine.*

And yet—while pumping milk may be about nourishment, it isn't really about communion. A human mother expresses milk because sometimes she can't be there to nurse her baby, either by choice or by necessity. Pumping is thus an admission of distance, of maternal finitude. But it is a separation, a finitude, suffused with best intentions. Milk or no milk, this is often the best we've got to give.

Once I suggested that I had written half a book drunk, the other half sober. Here I estimate that about nine-tenths of the words in this book were written “free,” the other one-tenth, hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump: words piled into one machine, milk siphoned out by another.

The phrase “toxic maternal” refers to a mother whose milk delivers poison along with nourishment. If you turn away from the poison, you also turn away from the nourishment. Given that human breast milk now contains literal poisons, from paint thinners to dry-cleaning fluid to toilet deodorizers to rocket fuel to DDT to flame retardants, there is literally no escape. Toxicity is now a question of degree, of acceptable parts per unit. Infants don’t get to choose—they take what they can get, in their scramble to stay alive.

I had never thought much about this dilemma until after I had been working for many years in a bar that was regularly voted “a smoker’s paradise” in a New York City guidebook. I had quit smoking a few months before taking the job, primarily because cigarettes made me feel so completely awful, and now I was spending hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars on an acupuncturist to help me with swollen glands and difficulty breathing as a result of inhaling smoke that wasn’t even mine. (I ended up quitting the job about a month before Mayor Bloomberg’s ban took effect; in my final hours, I secretly allowed myself to be interviewed by the antismoking crusaders, to advance their cause.) Anyone to whom I complained at the time said—wisely!—*Why don’t you just get a different job? There are hundreds upon hundreds of restaurants and bars in New York City.* My therapist—I had taken on yet another choking shift in order to keep seeing her—suggested I help rich kids study for the SAT instead, which made me

want to sock her. How could I explain? I had already had a hundred restaurant jobs in New York City, and finally I had found one at which I made more in a week than I would have in an entire semester as an adjunct instructor (the other discernible option). I also thought—a larval Karen Silkwood—if “they”—whoever they are—*let me work here, it couldn’t be that bad, could it?*

But it was that bad. The bills I stashed under my mattress were almost wet with smoke, and stayed that way until rent time. And it’s only now that I see that the job ensured me something else I needed: the constant company of alcoholics apparently worse off than I was. I can still see them all: the silent owner who had to be carried into the back of a taxi at dawn after he’d blacked out from Rolling Rocks and shots of Stolli that we’d served him, raking in his Wall Street-derived tips; the punk Swedes who drank shot after shot of jalapeno-pickled vodka dissolved in iced coffee (the Swedeball, we called it); the rotted teeth of a successful foley editor; the man who inexplicably took off his belt after a few Hurricanes and started whipping a fellow diner with it; the woman who left her baby in a car seat under the bar one night and forgot about it . . . their example, and the ease with which I deemed myself together by comparison, purchased me a few more years of believing alcohol more precious than toxic to me.

The self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic. . . . [Yet] dependence is scorned even in intimate relationships, as though dependence were incompatible with self-reliance rather than the only thing that makes it possible.

I learned this scorn from my own mother; perhaps it laced my milk. I therefore have to be on the alert for a tendency to treat

Adam Phillips/
Barbara Taylor

other people's needs as repulsive. Corollary habit: deriving the bulk of my self-worth from a feeling of hypercompetence, an irrational but fervent belief in my near total self-reliance.

You're a great student because you don't have any baggage, a teacher once told me, at which moment the subterfuge of my life felt complete.

One of the gifts of recognizing oneself in thrall to a substance is the perforation of such subterfuge. In place of an exhausting autonomy, there is the blunt admittance of dependence, and its subsequent relief. I will always aspire to contain my shit as best I can, but I am no longer interested in hiding my dependencies in an effort to appear superior to those who are more visibly undone or aching. Most people decide at some point that it is *better . . . to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one's being and becoming*. I'm glad not to be there right now, but I'm also glad to have been there, to know how it is.

Butler

Sedgwick was a famous pluralizer, an instinctive maximalist who named and celebrated her predilection for profusion as "fat art." I celebrate this fat art, even if in practice I am more of a serial minimalist—an employee, however productive, of the condensery. Rather than a philosopher or a pluralizer, I may be more of an empiricist, insofar as my *aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced* (creativity).

Deleuze/Parnet

I have never really thought of myself as a "creative person"—writing is my only talent, and writing has always felt more clarifying than creative to me. But in contemplating this defi-

nition, I wonder if one might be creative (or queer, or happy, or held) *in spite of oneself*.

That's enough. You can stop now: the phrase Sedgwick said she longed to hear whenever she was suffering. (Enough hurting, enough showing off, enough achieving, enough talking, enough trying, enough writing, enough living.)

The *capaciousness* of growing a baby. The way a baby literally *makes space* where there wasn't space before. The cartilage nub where my ribs used to fit together at the sternum. The little slide in my lower rib cage when I twist right or left that didn't used to slide. The rearrangement of internal organs, the upward squeezing of the lungs. The dirt that collects on your belly button when it finally pops inside out, revealing its bottom—finite, after all. The husky feeling in my postpartum perineum, the way my breasts filling all at once with milk is like an orgasm but more painful, powerful as a hard rain. While one nipple is getting sucked, the other sometimes sprays forth, unstoppable.

When I was writing on the poet James Schuyler in graduate school, my adviser noted in passing that I seemed oddly compelled by the idea of Schuyler's flaccidity. His comments on this account made me feel guilty, as if he thought I were trying to neuter or castrate Schuyler, a closet Solanas. I wasn't, at least not consciously. I just liked the way that Schuyler seemed to be performing, especially in his long poems, a drive to speech or creation not synonymous with desire in any typical sublimated-lust kind of a way. He had a cruising eye, to be sure (here he is in a grocery store: "I grabbed / a cart, went wheeling / up and down the aisles trying to get a front view of / him and see how