

## Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

Graywolf Press, Minneapolis

The first page of Maggie Nelson's memoir, *The Argonauts*, contains the following passage: "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." Thus, Nelson's radical treatise on love and its utterances—part meditation on silence, part struggle to name that which refuses to be named—begins both with an admission of love, and, in another vignette, with a row of "shadowy cocks" in a shower stall.

*The Argonauts* chronicles in short, nonsequential vignettes Nelson's courtship and relationship with the artist Harry Dodge, who identifies neither as male nor female (though throughout the text Nelson refers to Dodge as "he"). She charts the change of Dodge's body as he begins testosterone injections, at the same time that Nelson is pregnant with their first child. Through these poles of transformation, Nelson considers a number of contemporary subjects, including gay marriage, a woman's right to conceive, motherhood, and a person's relationship with a parent. Quotations from scholars and writers—whom Nelson calls the "many gendered mothers of my heart"—appear throughout the text in italics, with the name of each author in the margin of the page. Although these various interjections often support whatever Nelson is discussing, they mostly exist in dialogue with her own thinking, creating moments of conversation as Nelson moves through an idea.

At times, these conversations help Nelson to clarify her scholarly thinking, particularly pre- and post-baby. Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysts she once revered, no longer appeal to her. She explains this change unapologetically, inserting prose by writer Elizabeth Wood into her own: "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."

In a more scathing yet playful manner, Nelson riffs on Baudrillard, Žižek, and Badiou's intellectualizing of the transgendered subject, finding them "more embarrassing than enraging to read." She dismisses these giants of critical theory: "These are the voices that pass for radicality in our times. Let us leave them to their love, their event proper." It is a delicious passage, in which

the focus on the "event proper" begins and ends with heteronormativity—a desire so base as to be fixed is irrelevant to our present moment.

For Nelson, the act of writing is more about clarification than creativity—a condition to which her consistent return to her perceived "mothers" is attributable. Nelson's habit of pulling texts from writers, scholars, and artists has proved most successful in the memoir format of *The Argonauts*, however; when she took a similar approach in her recent critical work, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, the constant flood of quoted material, often divorced from its original context, was an irritant and a distraction. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson's chorus of voices productively entwines the personal and the political—subjectivities that are constantly changing. Such slippage is, ultimately, the engine of Nelson's writing, which refuses to ever be one thing. Nelson struggles with the notions that language may not be enough, and that silence may be a part of expression. She ruminates on the unsayable, or as she calls it "nothingness"—themes taken from Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*—which, Nelson notes on that first page, is sitting on Dodge's bedside table. She meanwhile strives to express herself and to be understood, even if what is communicated is always under review.

Nelson offers an alternative, radical approach to that persistent question of the woman's ability and desire to "have it all." "There is so much to be learned from wanting something both ways," she writes. There are many binary "ways" pursued in *The Argonauts*, where there are no *or*'s, only *and*'s: male and female, butch and femme, coupled and alone, brutal and tender, mother and child, intellectual and dilettante. By our capacity to shift, and to shift back, Nelson argues that women and men can have it "all," if not all in one moment.

These flexible identities infuse Nelson's writing with a similar sense of fluidity, even generosity. ("I don't want to represent anything," she writes.) It is unclear, however, whether Nelson's "both ways" inclusivity is, on a conceptual level, hindering her quest for meaning. Not everything is everything, she writes, citing scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's dictum "pluralize and specify." Nelson concludes that the specificities of one's inner life are what allow for a finitude that moves towards understanding, "an activity that demands an attentiveness—a relentlessness, even—whose very rigor tips it into ardor."

If slippage is, as I argue above, what turns the pages of *The Argonauts*, "feeling real" is what binds it together.

Nelson takes the phrase "to feel real" from psychologist D.W. Winnicott, for whom "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." Nelson connects this observation to her deep longing for her child, still in the womb, to caring for her stepson, and to her domestic life with Dodge. It is only when she begins to hold "it all" together that the memoir becomes personally and politically revolutionary. The last third of the book includes Nelson's labor narrative. ("I had always imagined the placenta like a rare fifteen-ounce steak," she writes. "Instead it's utterly indecent and colossal—a bloody sac filled with purple-black organs, a bag of whale hearts.") Her son's birth is described alongside staggering accounts of Dodge caring for his mother in the last hours of her life; the model is dialectical, illustrative of "a becoming that never becomes" that might give way to a sense of feeling real in the world. Nelson's views of happiness shift in relation to her son, from "moments of happiness, which is all I thought we got," to "a happiness that spreads."

More than a memoir, *The Argonauts* might be called an alchemy: an experimental process of transformation aided by incantations of love as referenced in Nelson's striking first few sentences. What is sought, through so many words collected, is a magic spell to enable care, love, and holding. Artist Allan Kaprow put it eloquently in his 1958 essay, "Notes on the Creation of a Total Art": "But one can insist, as many have, that only the changing is really enduring and all else is whistling in the dark."

—Katie Geha

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