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IMMEDIATE FAMILY

Maggie Nelson's life in words.

By Hilton Als

It's Nelson's articulation of her many selves that makes her readers feel hopeful.

Photograph by Graeme Mitchell for The New Yorker

May 5, 2015: that was when Maggie Nelson's ninth book, "The Argonauts," came out. Published two months after the author turned forty-two, the slim, intense volume, which tells the philosophical, sometimes comic tale of Nelson's ever-developing consciousness, combines—like a number of other masterpieces of American autobiography—memoir, literary analysis, humor, and reporting with vivid instances of both the familiar and the strange. Central to "The Argonauts" is the story of Nelson's great love for Harry Dodge, a West Coast sculptor, writer, and video artist who is fluidly gendered. As Nelson embarks on her intellectual and emotional journey, Harry also goes on various excursions in order to become the person he is now, whom Nelson describes, quoting a character from Harry's 2001 film, "By Hook or By Crook," as neither male nor female but "a special—a two for one."

Sara Marcus, in an elegant and concise review of “The Argonauts,” for the Los Angeles *Times*, notes the way that Nelson circles “away and back again to central questions about deviance and normalcy, family-making and love.” What Nelson is asking, throughout the book, Marcus says, is “How does anyone decide what’s normal and what’s radical? What kinds of experience do we close ourselves off to when we think we already know?” Last month, the book won the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, but long before that it was passed around and praised by any number of readers who knew nothing, or next to nothing, about Nelson’s interest in queerness, let alone lives like the ones her memoir grew out of and embodies. What those fans responded to most viscerally, perhaps, was the fact that it’s a book about becoming, both mentally and physically—about what it takes to shape a self, in all its completeness and disarray.

In “The Argonauts,” at the time that Harry is taking testosterone and having a double mastectomy, Maggie is pregnant with their son, Iggy, who is now four. It’s one of the rare moments in modern literature where the pregnant woman does not stand alone, wondering what will become of her or her child; Papa’s going through some fairly significant shit, too. But before the reader can settle into any kind of cozy acceptance of all that, Nelson shifts course again, asking what family can mean when the body is no longer a body but dust and then a memory. Is memory the tie that binds? Is love?

When Harry talks about his life—as he did, with great affability, one evening last August, at a corner table in a dark Los Angeles restaurant—the diminutive, auburn-haired Nelson listens with quiet seriousness. Her pale face turns nearly as red as her hair when Harry says something about their connection, or when she interrupts him to interject an idea or a detail about his own life which he may have forgotten. Afterward, Nelson may blush again or quickly smooth down her hair or say, even more quickly, “Right, right, right,” as a way of marking time, before continuing on with, or going deeper into, whatever she was talking about.

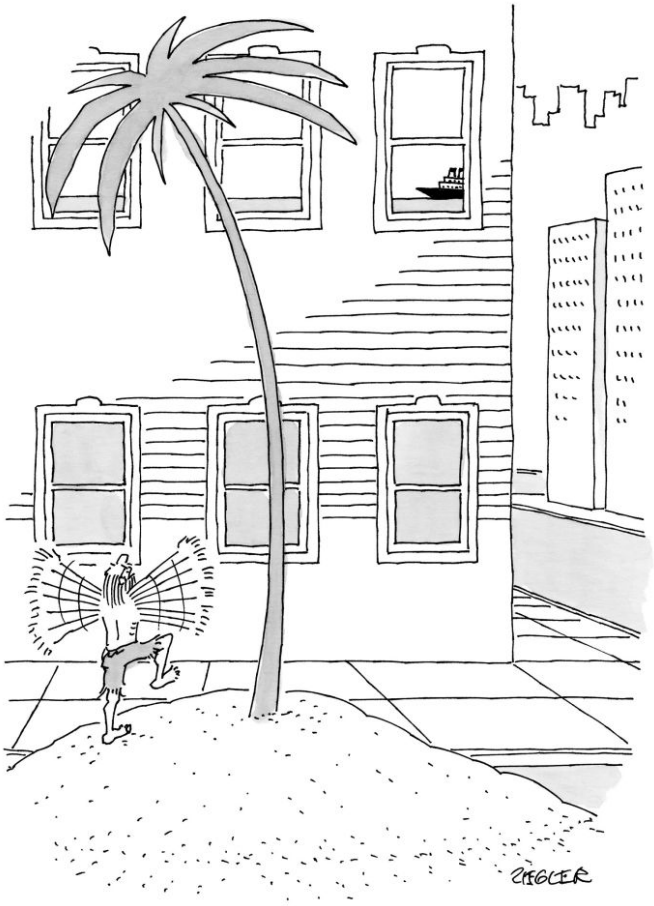
Speaking freely but thoughtfully is important to Nelson, in part because as a kid she was teased for being a “Chatty Cathy,” and in part because she finds ideas irrepressible and exciting to explore. Not surprisingly, Nelson has a very precise relationship to language—and to the vicissitudes of personal history, including the self-mythologizing that goes into making a transformed self. She has published four volumes of accomplished verse, but it’s her prose works, which cover an array of intellectual and social issues, that have brought her a wider readership: the devastating “The Red Parts” (published in 2007 and reissued this month, by Graywolf), for instance, focusses on the aftermath of the 1969 murder of Nelson’s aunt and the trial, thirty-six years later, of a suspect in the case; in “The Art of Cruelty” (2011), Nelson explores the role of the body in an age of extremity; and in “The Argonauts” she questions what it means to be a lover, a parent, someone’s child—“heteronormative” roles—when you don’t feel heteronormative, let alone comfortable with such traditional labels as “gay,” “straight,” “female,” and “male.”

In all of her books, Nelson picks at the underbelly of certainty and finds scabs—the white-male-patriarchy scab, the smug-female-thinker scab, the academic scab—and yet she gives these voices a place in her work, because, as her friend the novelist Rachel Kushner put it, “she knows exactly what kind of language, at this moment, what kind of views, are important, but she also understands that people are vulnerable and they get things wrong, not through malicious intent. Sometimes it’s just a misstep, or they’re too far from the other person’s subjectivity.” Matthew Barney, an artist known for his high-risk, epic exploration of American masculinity, told me that, for him, “The Art of Cruelty” was “the missing piece of a puzzle,” in terms of analyzing a world saturated with pornography and torture. “Maggie’s voice had a certain level of doubt and a self-reflective vibe that made me trust her, even when she was criticizing stuff that I really love.”

It’s Nelson’s articulation of her many selves—the poet who writes prose; the memoirist who considers the truth specious; the essayist whose books amount to a kind of fairy tale, in which the protagonist

goes from darkness to light, and then falls in love with a singular knight—that makes her readers feel hopeful. Her universe is "queer," fluid, as is Harry's (tattooed on the fingers of his left and right hands, respectively, are the words "flow" and "form"), but this sense of flux has little to do with the kind of sentimental hippiedom that emerged, say, in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of Maggie and Harry's home town in the sixties. Nelson is just as critical of the politics of inclusion as of exclusion. What you find in her writing, rather, is a certain ruefulness—an understanding that life is a crapshoot that's been rigged, but to whose advantage?

Maggie met Harry in April, 2007, the year that "The Red Parts" came out. The occasion was a joint book party in celebration of "The Red Parts" and of a new poetry collection by Eileen Myles, at the Machine Project, a Los Angeles art space.



The two had settled in L.A. at different times. Back in the early nineties, in San Francisco, Harry had co-founded Red Dora's Bearded Lady, a community-based performance space, and staged a number of solo pieces around the city, before joining Sister Spit, the now legendary spoken-word and performance-art collective—for a time, they were signed to Mr. Lady Records—which also featured Myles, for what he describes as a "weird dyke tour roving around the country." Priced out of San Francisco by 1999, Harry joined his partner at the time, the video artist Stanya Kahn, in New York. Two years later, they moved to L.A., where they had a son, whom they still co-parent, though their relationship dissolved in early 2007.

Maggie arrived in 2005, when she was offered a teaching position at the California Institute of the Arts. (She'd taught at Wesleyan, her alma mater, for a year before that.) L.A., as she wrote in "The Red Parts," seemed "as good a place as any other." By the time they met, Harry, who was making video pieces and other work that examined marginalism and capitalism, had come to love L.A., but Maggie was lonely and disoriented there.

Of their first meeting, Harry told me, "She was just open-faced. Big strong smile, firm handshake, and then—*whoosh*—blushing." A few months later, he e-mailed her to ask if she'd like to take a walk. He reasoned that "walking is good, because if you're really nervous you can get the jitters out." Before seeing her again, Harry read several of Nelson's books, including "The Red Parts" and her verse exploration of the same subject, "Jane: A Murder" (2005). He admired the structure of "The Red Parts," which Nelson had wanted to have a "documentarian" feel. (While working on it, she read Peter Handke's classic about his mother's suicide, "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams," another record of a silent, lost woman.) For Harry, the book's many narrative strands, interrupted by or leading to other strands, indicated Maggie's understanding of how in real life tales don't always add up. They met at the Silver Lake Reservoirs and walked and talked and talked.

In "The Argonauts," Nelson writes about the first days of the love affair:

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

around for an answer.

At the restaurant in L.A. in August, Maggie excused herself to use the restroom, and I took the opportunity to ask Harry what it felt like to be written about so intimately. (When the book was first published, the pair gave a joint interview in which Harry admitted that, several years into their relationship, he was "still getting used to being with someone who writes 'personally.' " He went on, "I've been a very private person. Kind of a public person as an artist in some sense, but very private in most ways. And so I said at some point, sort of earlier in our relationship, that being with her was like an epileptic being married to a strobe-light artist.") He smiled. He said that he tried to keep the responses to Nelson's work "a little blurry, because specifics might be too much for me to know, or to bear. Like most people, I was very concerned about how I'm represented, and how people respond to me."

I said, "Sure. You're human."

"Yeah, exactly. And so, I am capable of staying away from a kind of stream of feedback. And, in a way, that's what I've done. So, to answer your question, it hasn't been that strange. I don't know what you asked. What did you ask?"

We laughed: I was already being "blurred."

Maggie, returning to the table, asked what we'd been talking about. I said, "Book chat."

Harry said, "He asked how has it been with the response to 'The Argonauts.' "

Maggie, blushing a bit and looking down, said, "Oh, *that* kind of book chat."

Letting someone into your life involves letting someone into your complications. “And then, just like that, I was folding your son’s laundry,” Nelson writes in “The Argonauts.” “He had just turned three. Such little socks! Such little underwear! I marveled at them.” Throughout Nelson’s books there is an undeniable desire to belong to a family, including the one she was born into.

Raised in Marin County, California, Maggie was the second child of Bruce and Barbara Nelson, both of whom loved words. Barb, as she was called, had written a dissertation on Virginia Woolf, at San Francisco State University, while pregnant with her first child, Emily. Bruce was a lawyer—and a great talker, Maggie says—who travelled a lot during the early years of their marriage, leaving his wife home alone with two children. When Maggie was seven, Barb fell in love with a man who’d painted the Nelson house. She and Bruce divorced the following year, and after that Maggie and Emily split their time between their father’s place and the home their mother shared with her new husband.

Maggie’s father encouraged her to be whatever she wanted to be. He left out clippings of articles on subjects that interested her—dance, theatre—and in those words Nelson saw possibilities. In the early evening of January 28, 1984, when Maggie was ten, Barbara received a phone call from a friend of Bruce’s; the friend had been supposed to meet Bruce that afternoon but he hadn’t shown up. In “The Red Parts,” she describes, with calm horror, the rest of that evening: Barb and the girls getting in the car and driving over to Bruce’s house; one of the girls asking that the car radio be turned down, because “its manic chirping sounded all wrong”; Barb telling the girls to stay upstairs while she went downstairs to her ex-husband’s bedroom to investigate, then ordering them outside; the paramedics arriving. Bruce had died, of a heart attack, at forty.

> “I think when he died and people were trying to find the reason for why he died—it was the era when

"Pictographs or it didn't happen."

everyone talked about being Type A," Maggie told me. "And I began to feel like I was maybe Type A as well." She laughed. "I didn't have to worry about any particular trait being terminal. Life would do me in no matter what my traits." Often children find it easier to blame death or divorce on the parent who stays. Emily thought their father had died of a broken heart, and for years Maggie resented her mother for not having let her go into the bedroom where she found the body—maybe there were clues as to what had killed him which only Maggie could have spotted. The close-knit trio of Barb, Emily, and Maggie unravelled, for a time. Maggie reacted negatively, at first, to Barb's new husband. In "The Red Parts," Nelson says of that unnamed man:

> With a kind of measured sadism whose roots continue to elude me, each Christmas my stepfather would wrap up the Chinese Yellow Pages (which my mother couldn't read) and blank VHS tapes (which she had no use for) to give to her as gifts, as if to remind her that he hated the holidays, hated gift-giving, and . . . that he was committed to performing these hatreds each year with a Dadaesque spirit of invention. But there was a trick: one year he planted a pair of real pearl earrings at the bottom of this pile of wrapped Wal-Mart garbage, so in subsequent years our mother never knew if a treasure were coming. It never did, but the tension remained high; her disappointment, acute.

Emily acted out, hanging with a rough crowd. Maggie forced herself to be the responsible daughter, the good girl who did well at school and avoided trouble, behaving at times like a kind of emotional spousal equivalent for her mother. It would take Maggie years to figure out that what life breaks sometimes has to stay broken.

In 1990, she moved east, to attend Wesleyan, where she studied English. Post-structuralism was not only in the air, it was becoming central to the curriculum. This meant that the dead white men were being questioned and held to account for what they'd got wrong. The thinking empire was dead. Long live Gayatri Spivak! Maggie studied writing with Annie Dillard, eventually producing a thesis on Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath (with some Foucault)—outsiders who made noise by talking about their bodies and their relationship to death. In 1998, Nelson enrolled in the graduate program in English at the City University of New York. She waitressed to support herself and lived in a series of decrepit apartments that she didn't bother to fix up. When one fell apart, she'd move into another, maybe putting a couple of beers in the fridge, but for the most part her life was not what you'd call domestic.

Despite the unsteadiness and drift, there was the life of the mind—the order and disorder one could chart and articulate through language. "She found a friendship with her instabilities and turned it immediately into questions that are dazzled, rather than narcotized," the writer Wayne Koestenbaum, with whom Nelson studied at CUNY, told me. "The language of criticism fit her like a glove. She already had the whole personality and she was much more fluent than I am, or anyone I know—with just putting together a paragraph so that it flows and pursues an argument in a non-pedestrian way. A quality of being on fire with questions." Koestenbaum's work and guidance released Nelson from certain internalized academic expectations. She said, "I remember when I first met Wayne he told me, 'Don't get bogged down by the heavyweights.' It sounds so simple, but it was very freeing advice. A sense of permission."

At CUNY, Nelson wrote a dissertation, which was published by the University of Iowa Press, in 2007, as "Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions." In it, she explores the flip side of macho nineteen-fifties and sixties New York Abstract Expressionist painting and poetry; she looks at the spaces that fiercely independent female

artists, like Joan Mitchell, and gay male poets, like James Schuyler and Frank O'Hara, built, friend by friend and complication by complication—a family united in its difference. The book traffics in a fair amount of academic language, but Nelson perverts the staid stuff with an intimate tone that intertwines quotations, close readings of the work, and plain old feeling.

Before grad school, Nelson had furthered her education in other ways. In the mid-nineties, Eileen Myles would put up flyers in the East Village and hold poetry workshops for a nominal fee. Maggie took some classes, and the two women became close—so close that Nelson is now Myles's literary executor. Despite that bond, Myles has always marvelled at Nelson's "formal" quality, which may have something to do with the difference between what she's willing to reveal in life and what she reveals on the page. Many of Nelson's early poems involve the body—wanting to escape its limitations or to connect more deeply to the pleasure it can give others. In her 2003 collection, "The Latest Winter," she describes "the poetry of the future": "it's got to come from at least three brains: the brain in the head, the gut-brain, and the brain in the ovaries. it will wax red and rise bone-white." In "1999," from the same collection, the body can start to seem like an angry joke, but, then again, most jokers are angry:

> In my dream last night
>
> I had a boob job
>
> and my nipples were
>
> pointing off in two
>
> different directions.
>
> It was disorienting
>
> and the photographer
>
> was disappointed.
>
> But later he turned into
>
> the best lay of my life
>
> He was so huge

to get inside me. . . .

Upon penetration

everything exploded—

he exploded, I exploded

the dream exploded

I didn't even remember it

until you grabbed my breasts

In "1999," as in much of Nelson's verse, there is a "you" she's trying to communicate with, a lover or a friend she wants to get closer to by breaking down her feelings in language. One reason she enjoyed writing poetry in those years, she told me, was the way it allowed her to avoid gender references. "I barely ever had third-person pronouns in poetry," she said. "It was always such a pleasure that it could all just be a 'you.' Pronouns are, you know, so bossy and noisy."

The "you" in "1999" may be the same man Nelson writes about in "Bluets" (2009), a short prose work about the color blue and feeling blue, in which absence in general and the "you" 's absence in particular drive the story:

116. One of the last times you came to see me, you were wearing a pale-blue button-down shirt, short-sleeved. *I wore* this for you*, you said. We fucked for six hours straight that afternoon, which does not seem precisely possible but that is what the clock said. We killed the time. You were on your way to a seaside town, a town of much blue, where you would be spending a week with the other woman you were in love with, the woman you are with now. *I'm in love with you both in completely different ways*, you said. It seemed unwise to contemplate this statement any further. . . . Not long after that

> afternoon I came across a photograph of you
> with this woman. You were wearing the shirt.

Nelson told me that “Bluets” was, to some extent, “a formal experiment,” a marrying of “the emotional content to this kind of faux-Wittgensteinian form.” Balancing pathos with philosophy, she created a new kind of classicism, queer in content but elegant, almost cool in shape.

“Bluets” wasn’t Nelson’s first experiment with form. “Jane: A Murder” (2005), her breakthrough work, tells the story, in poetry, of her mother’s younger sister, Jane Louise Mixer. In 1969, Jane, a smart, political twenty-three-year-old student at the University of Michigan, posted a note on a college bulletin board, looking for a ride to Muskegon. She was going home for spring break. The next time her family saw her, she was dead—strangled and shot by an unknown assailant. (A man was convicted of the crime in 2005.) A book of verse, “Jane: A Murder” is not strictly poetical: Nelson drops in crime reports, newspaper stories, and other “news” about Mixer’s hideous death, alongside monologues, poems, letters, and diary entries that try to return Jane to herself, unmangled. Writing about Jane and Barb, Nelson could easily have been writing about herself and her own sister:

> Two sisters, fifteen years apart, sharing a yellow room.
>
> They divided it in two; it drove Barb nuts
>
> that Jane’s closet was on Barb’s side of the room.
>
> All the myths have been juggled about, so
>
> it’s hard now to figure out
>
> who was messy, who was neat
>
> who awkward, who popular.

Sisters, twinning and not, male power and violence, Nelson’s

identification with Jane's intellectualism and political interests are all rendered in the book with a watchful intensity that takes the reader into Jane's lost and reimagined body and Maggie's living and inventing mind. "It added a certain heat to the text" to use Jane's own voice, culled from her diaries, Nelson told me. And, in a way, the book was the end of a particular kind of recognizable verse for her; no stanza could contain it. Myles told me that "Jane: A Murder" was "like the band that suddenly becomes the Beatles. . . . A chemical thing happens and magic occurs in art-making, and for Maggie it was when she found Jane. All her tricks, all her talents, all her powers came forward."

It was with "Jane: A Murder" that Nelson went from being a versifier to being a writer who plays with prose and remakes the genre. It was to that person that Harry found himself drawn in 2007, during their afternoon at the Silver Lake Reservoirs. Maggie, he said, helped him get over the skepticism that he was feeling about language as "this thing that misses all the time." She showed him, he explained, how "it actually can be quite precise and very specific." Maggie's work helped change Harry, and it's hard not to notice how her tendency to defy categorization as a writer parallels his resistance to being classified as a person. "I'm not interested in categories," he told me. "People put too much pressure on the world and smash it into boxes, and they're trying to make sense of things that are just a flow. And they're doing it a disservice."

A year or so after they started dating, Maggie and Harry got married. Maggie writes about it in "The Argonauts":

> 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, naïve 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. . . .

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

Last month, Harry did the work of a spouse when he got on a plane in L.A. and flew to New York for a day to hold Maggie's hand while she sat in the great hall at the New School for Social Research for the National Book Critics' Circle Awards. Resplendent in a blue shirt and black jacket and stroking his beard, Harry listened with interest as the winners were announced. When Maggie's name was read out, he kissed her. Maggie stood near the stage as the critic Walton Muyumba read the citation, concluding, "She lends critical theory something that it frequently lacks, namely, examples drawn from real life, real art-making, and real bodies." As he read, Maggie loosened her hair and then smoothed it down. Taking the stage, she thanked various people in her professional life. Looking up, she added:

> If you read "The Argonauts," you'll know that this book—it literally stands on the shoulders of . . . the wild revolutionary work of so many feminist, queer, and anti-racist thinkers, writers, activists, and artists. . . . I called those people in my book "the many-gendered mothers of my heart," which is a phrase I steal from the poet Dana Ward, but I do have a specific mother, who's also here tonight—Mom, I love you. . . . And, last but not least, thank you, Harry Dodge . . . who so generously allowed me to write about our conjoined life to make this book, and it is beyond lucky that you stand by me tonight and every day.

theguardian

Maggie Nelson interview: ‘People write to me to let me know that, in case I missed it, there are only two genders’

The author of the much acclaimed The Argonauts talks about unconventional family life, the brutal murder of her aunt and violating her own privacy in her work

‘Literature can describe the flickering, bewildered places that people actually inhabit’ … Maggie Nelson. Photograph: Deirdre O’Callaghan for the Guardian

Paul Laity

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From the moment last year when *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson’s most recent book, was published in her native US, it was much talked-about, fervently recommended, highly fashionable. A blend of autobiographical writing, comment and quotation, it is about many things, one of which is love. The book tells how Nelson, after years of painful solitude, begins a joyful relationship with the artist Harry Dodge – she is amazed to come to terms with “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.*”

She relates how she and Dodge have great sex (“was his sexual power, which I already felt to be immense, a kind of spell I’d fallen under…?”), move in together and get married. Setting up home, they aren’t just a couple but a family: with them is Dodge’s three-year-old son from a previous relationship. Nelson, once dismissive of “breeders”, suddenly becomes an adoring step-parent, folding a young child’s tiny clothes. It soon emerges that this is a tale of more than one love. The book charts Nelson’s pregnancy, the birth of her son Iggy, and her first experiences as a mother: “It isn’t like a love affair. It *is* a love affair,” she writes of her and Iggy. “Or rather, it is romantic, erotic and consuming … I have my baby, and my baby has me.”

Nelson is candid, funny and – for many years a poet – has a talent for compression and juxtaposition that makes for an enthralling use of language. But this isn’t the only reason *The Argonauts*, now out in the UK, became a bestseller and has made such an impact. Nelson’s family is no ordinary family, whatever that might mean. During the first weeks with Dodge, despite them having spent “every free moment in bed together”, she is unsure what pronoun to use for her lover: he or she? To find the answer, a friend Googles Harry – who was born female, and at one point took the name Harriet Dodge – on her behalf. Dodge is fluidly gendered, but passes as a male – at least until the inevitable awkward moments when he shows his driver’s licence or credit card.

During the summer of 2011, as Nelson’s body is changing with her pregnancy, Dodge’s body is altering too – after years of being unable to live in his skin, with neck and back “pulsing with pain” from breast-binding, he injects testosterone and eventually undergoes “top surgery” (a double mastectomy). The couple have an apparently conventional domestic set-up, “flush with joy in our house on the hill”, and on the street or in restaurants they are often treated as a “normal” heterosexual family – man, pregnant woman, young child. Nelson interrogates how this feels, but is more interested in redefining what a family might mean. *The Argonauts* wants to untie the knots that limit the way we talk about gender and the institutions of marriage and childbirth.

Artist Harry Dodge in 2012

"It's been a big year for issues of sexuality," Nelson says, when we meet at her home in the Highland Park neighbourhood of Los Angeles. She is referring in part to what has been called a "transgender moment", with trans people more prominent than ever before (on TV, on the covers of high-profile magazines). So *The Argonauts* presents a series of very timely challenges – to binary or fixed ideas of sexuality, as well as to the many cliches surrounding pregnancy and early motherhood. (In fact, the book is a challenge to categorical ways of thinking about most things, and to prescription per se: Nelson embraces ambivalence.)

"I like to think that what literature can do that op-ed pieces and other communications don't do is describe felt experience," she tells me, "the flickering, bewildered places that people actually inhabit. I hope my book has made a nuanced contribution to a conversation that is important but can be too clearly delineated." She mentions that among her readers are people who don't get it, and who "write to me to let me know that, in case I missed it, there are only two genders, and anything else I might think is wrong. I want to write back and say: thank you so much for this news! Thanks for clearing that up for me!"

The Argonauts is full of telling autobiographical episodes, including Nelson being saluted by a member of the uniformed services simply for being pregnant ("the seduction of normalcy"). Its form, however, is far from that of typical life-writing. Not only is the chronology fractured, but the short, meticulously assembled, passages ("I'm not a good shoot-from-the-hip kind of person," she says) include excerpts of theory – from the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Donald Winnicott and more.

"As I always do, I gave myself permission to be esoteric and complicated," she reflects. "It was not a book in which I dumbed down or shaved the edges off, which is why its so-called success has been great, because I've always believed that people read much more challenging things than they are given credit for." Her book has just won the National Book Critics Circle award for criticism.

In fact, Nelson describes *The Argonauts* as "a long tribute to the many feminist heroes that I had as teachers, men as well as women" (among them Sedgwick, Eileen Myles, Wayne Koestenbaum); "I call them 'the many gendered mothers of my heart'." As a student and young writer, she was "forged in the fire" of feminist and queer theory. (She has harsh words for such thinkers as Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard, who are unenlightened on issues of gender: they are men "pontificating from the podium", the "voices that pass for radicality in our times".)

The Argonauts documents the pleasures of a life "ablaze with care", but is also streaked with darker colours – experiences without which, as Nelson says, happiness would not be so "visible and real". Towards the end, a moving account of being in labour with Iggy is interleaved with beautiful paragraphs written by Dodge about tending to his mother during her final days dying of cancer. And there are other moments of "anxiety and dread"; for a short while, Iggy is even stricken by a rare and potentially fatal illness.

Nelson has said she deliberately "violates her privacy" in her writing ("People often ask me: do I feel it's OK to put details of my private life in public? But there's no genteel questioning, 'should I or shouldn't I?'"). We know a lot about her from the books, in particular the shadow cast over her family by the brutal murder of her aunt in 1969. She has scrutinised her childhood anxieties, her drinking and turn to sobriety, her beloved father's death from a heart attack when she was 10, her liking of porn and interest in anal sex, her trip to the hospital with a junkie boyfriend who had overdosed, her past tendency to put herself "in fucked-up situations", and so on.

In *The Argonauts*, she writes that Dodge, a more private person, "has told me more than once that being with me is like an epileptic with a pacemaker being married to a strobe-light artist".

"Writing has been my main love for my whole life," Nelson says. She tells a story in *The Red Parts* – her 2007 book which is about to be reissued by Graywolf Press in the US – about going, aged eight or nine, to her father's office "perched atop a glorious skyscraper in downtown San Francisco". Once up there, "he would give me a legal pad and a pen … My job was to write down everything that happened in the room – my father's hectic pacing, his wild gesticulations on the phone, visits from fellow lawyers … the view of the slate-gray harbour below." Ever since, she says, recounting the tale, she has been "scribing … paying attention to everything going on around me".

Nelson was born in 1973 and grew up in the Bay Area, though "I had many households because my parents divorced and lived in many different places". She has always been "hard" on her mother in her writing, she admits, not least the fact of her leaving her father for another man a couple of years before her dad's death at the age of 40. Nelson's older sister, Emily, ran wild, having an abortion in her early teens, dropping acid, watching snuff films, stealing their mother's car. In large part, Maggie "got good grades and flew under the radar", but she had panic attacks about death and dying, and as a teenager she "liked to take baths in the dark with coins placed over my eyes".

Aged 12, she was delighted to win a poetry contest held under the auspices of her favourite band the Cure: hers was "a terrible poem", a crude imitation of the lyrics on their album *The Top*, but her words were reprinted in a black pamphlet sent to her, and it was "an incredible thought" that someone had picked out what she written. "I read that Robert Smith loved Earl Grey tea and the novels of Patrick White, so I went through a phase of drinking Earl Grey tea and reading Patrick White. In Haight Ashbury. It was a strange moment."

Having visited New York a couple of times as a teenager, Nelson's "needle pointed that way". She left home, aged 17, to attend Wesleyan University in Connecticut, an hour and a half outside of the city. There, she was taught writing by the Pulitzer prize-winning Annie Dillard, and encountered for the first time the "charismatic and outspoken" Eileen Myles, who in 1991 – in an act that was part performance stunt,

Eileen Myles ... a 'many gendered mother' of Nelson's heart. Photograph: Catherine Opie

Patti Smith ... another of Nelson's heroes. Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives

part protest - was running for president as the first "openly female" (also openly gay) candidate; Nelson's college was one of her campaign stops.

Afterwards, Nelson has written, "I literally moved to NYC to find [Myles's] body, her voice, to be near whatever it was I saw and heard that night." She attended many of the workshops that Myles ran from her home in the East Village, met "artists in all kinds of fields", and considers this her equivalent of taking a fine arts master's degree. She took countless jobs in bars and restaurants, and became part of an avant garde, DIY, punk poetry scene involving the small indie Soft Skull Press - and read poetry before rock shows (Patti Smith is another of Nelson's heroes). "I wasn't the kind of writer who was saying, oh if only the New Yorker would publish me," she laughs. "Self-publishing wasn't what you did because you were rejected by HarperCollins; it was what you did because it was fun to make zines and run around with them."

In 1998 Nelson began a graduate course at the City University of New York. It was here that she began working on the project that would become her 2007 book *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*. She published books of poetry, but realised that poetry "was never the full container for what I wanted to do". She also continued the eight years' work that went into *Jane: A Murder*, published in 2005.

Her mother's sister, Jane Mixer, was travelling home from the University of Michigan for spring break when she was killed: her body was found with two bullets in her brain and a stocking so tightly wound around her neck that her head was nearly severed. "We were born under the shadow of this very recent event in my mother's life," Nelson tells me. A year after it happened, her parents moved to California, "literally moving away from the scene of the crime". The murder remained unsolved, though for many years it was "thought to be part of a serial killing spree called the Michigan murders, attributed to a guy called John Collins, who is still in prison".

"There was a real sense of dread and unknowability around the story," Nelson remembers. She decided to tackle the subject "as a writer and feminist and someone interested in not letting the striking down of this motivated, intelligent, civil-rights-oriented person go down in repressed family history." She unearthed Jane's journals, and conducted innumerable hours of research in order to write what was to become a collage of poetry, prose and documentary sources - words designed to "disrupt the tabloid, 'page-turner' quality of the story". Nelson immersed herself so deeply that she began to be afflicted by what she called "murder mind": "I could work all day on my project with a certain distance, blithely looking up 'bullet' or 'skull' in my rhyming dictionary. But in bed at night I found a smattering of sickening images of violent acts ready and waiting for me."

Just as *Jane* was about to be published, late in 2004, Nelson, incredibly, "got a call from Michigan state police saying they had a DNA match in the case, after 36 years, and that they were going to bring a new suspect to trial". She was exhausted by it all but, when the trial was announced, "it seemed too strange not to go". So Nelson - now an expert on the case, consulted by the homicide detective - attended every day with her mother, endured a gruesome few months, and wrote *The Red Parts*. The book is subtitled "Autobiography of a Trial", and she describes it now as "a pretty straightforward courtroom narrative interspersed with stories about my childhood". The suspect was found guilty.

In 2005, she left New York for Los Angeles to take up a prized teaching job at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). This seems to have ushered in "the loneliest three years of my life". An intense affair had recently ended; she was a jilted lover. "I found myself losing the man I loved," she wrote in *The Red Parts*. "I was falling, or had fallen, out of a story, the story of a love I wanted very much ... And the pain of the loss had deranged me."

This pain is at the heart of what was Nelson's best-known work until *The Argonauts* - the cult favourite *Bluets* (2009). Comprising 240 numbered paragraphs written between 2003 and 2006, the study started out as a meditation on colour and an exploration of the

"staggering experience of aesthetic wonder". Nelson had always collected blue things, and at one time hoped to travel to "famously blue places" – ancient woad production sites, Chartres cathedral, the lapis mines of Afghanistan and so on. But "then I had this breakup", she says, and soon afterwards a close friend was left paralysed by an accident. "And I let those things permeate the book, so that it began to be about the relationship between pleasure and pain, and not just about beauty."

But before *Bluets* even appeared, Nelson met Dodge – who is also on the faculty at CalArts – at her party to celebrate the publication of *The Red Parts*. She was sharing the stage with Myles, "and Eileen and Harry go back a long way". Dodge lived most of his formative art years in San Francisco and ran a cafe and public space called Red Dora's Bearded Lady. With Myles, he was involved with the spoken word and performance art collective Sister Spit; in 2001 he made the "queer buddy" film *By Hook or By Crook*, with Silas Howard (who is Iggy's godfather, and a director on the TV show *Transparent*). "Harry was working the West Coast angle, while I was in New York … but it's the same world."

A scene from the TV series Transparent on which Silas Howard was a director. Photograph: Amazon/Everett/REX Shutterstock

Their meeting was a moment of renewal. The title of *The Argonauts* comes from a Roland Barthes passage that compares a person saying "I love you" to one of the Argonauts who repairs and renews his ship during its voyage. Nelson recalls that, feeling vulnerable after having said "I love you" to Dodge at the beginning of their time together, she sent him the quote, which suggests that the "task of love and language" is "to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new".

Near the beginning of the book, Nelson describes her and Dodge getting married hours before California revoked its legislation on gay marriage and began a (temporary) ban. "Poor marriage!", she writes. "Off we went to kill it (unforgiveable). Or reinforce it (unforgiveable)" – their marriage is both subversive and the opposite of subversive. She examines different facets of this, and later remarks on the "assimilationist" bent of "the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement" that has rushed to seek entrance into "two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military".

She tells me that Harry and her talk a lot at home about the hopefulness embedded in much queer theory that "there's something about non-normative genders and sexualities" that encourages a politically radical tendency. "We don't yet know how people would behave if we stopped incentivising marriage" financially and culturally, she says. But for the moment, "the tethering of politics to certain genders and sexualities has probably passed … The most shocking thing about Caitlyn Jenner is that she's a Republican. That's proof alone that it's not clear what politics stem from certain gender and sexuality arrangements."

Before meeting Dodge, Nelson was suspicious of the whole idea of family – "for all the familiar feminist, queer, and collectivity-based" reasons. But Harry, she has said, used the term "so widely and happily. It really amazed me." When the two got married, it was, we learn in *The Argonauts*, in a temporary chapel room, with a drag queen at the door who "did triple duty as a greeter, bouncer, and witness". Officiating was Reverend Lorelei Starbuck, who listed her denomination as "Metaphysical" on the forms. The ceremony was rushed, and in some ways deeply unserious, but the couple didn't account for love: "as we said our vows, we were undone. We wept, besotted with our luck." Then they went to pick up Dodge's son, "came home and ate chocolate pudding all together in sleeping bags on the porch, looking out over the mountain".

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INTERVIEW

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Maggie Nelson Writes Books Like She's Hosting a Party

By **Maggie Lange**

Maggie Nelson. Photo: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is a book of borrowing and sharing. She credits other thinkers generously, divulges openly, and writes so exquisitely that everyone always seems to be lending their copy to someone else (I don't even remember who has mine). When Nelson spoke at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last week, moderator Lorin Stein said he'd given the book away so many times that he was now on his third.

At the event (part of the Eat, Drink and Be Literary series) Nelson answered a strange bouquet of audience questions, many of which seemed to be excuses for the question-askers to describe how meaningful Nelson's work had been for them. There is something daring in the intimacy of Nelson's work, and it seemed to invite readers and fans to speak freely — about shame, jealousy, pregnancy, the movie *Fame*. Her books, five works of nonfiction and four books of poetry, are light in your hands but heavy and powerful in all the nonliteral senses. *Bluets* is 112 pages; at 160 pages, *The Argonauts* — her last book — is an exhilarating tour de force drawing on queer and feminist theory as well as the personal narrative of Nelson's family.

Nelson and I spoke after she received her MacArthur Foundation grant last year. At one point in our conversation, Nelson mentioned identifying with Foucault — who, when asked to describe his sexuality, said, "I identify as a reader." Perhaps that's a helpful way to examine Nelson's own work: absorbing can be intoxicating. We talked about her writing and her readers while a cute-sounding dog named Billie barked in the background.

I want to bring up an observation I've made about *The Argonauts*, and *Bluets* a bit too. Particularly among young literary queers, they've become prominent signals — on bookshelves, but mostly on the internet, *The Argonauts* is the book see I more than any other in people's profile photos.

Hahahaha that's so funny! I love it! Ah, it's so cool! It's so cute. I love it.

Is this surprising?

I have seen this happen to other books, generationally. I think on *The L Word* they brought in *Autobiography of Red*. There are a lot of polemical tracks about gender and sexuality that you could pull up for a profile page, but there is something both precise and messy about the kind of community that is both pictured and embodied in *The Argonauts*. What's been happy-making to me is to see how many people seemed happy or recognize themselves, if not in particulars, in the nuance of living a life that's all happily and occasionally unhappily fucked-up about gender and sexuality. It's happy-making to me when that nuance is as much a call to community as something that would be more clearly defined.

It's also really cool, generationally. I spent most of my life being a young writer. I'm 43. That means there are a lot of people now who are half my age who come out and who read me and make me feel old, but it feels great.

It's really exciting to move from the person who you feel like was always there. You know how it is to be a young woman: People are always like, *Are you allowed to use this copy machine,* and you're like, *I teach here goddamnit!* You're constantly waiting for when you're just not going to be infantilized. There is something about growing up as a writer and seeing that reflected in people younger that makes me feel really happy and feels sort of sweet.

What I love too, if this sounds self-aggrandizing I don't mean it to be, but I think my work has moved through all kinds of sexualities and expressions. I like the idea of *Bluets* as a queer book even if the object of affection in it is a gendered male. And I like the idea of *The Argonauts* as a straight book — not as a straight book, but I like it that with so-called straight people, it might speak to their concerns about family making. I like that trafc in places that are both likely and unlikely.

What was the most nerve-racking idea you pursued in your writing?
They all have been nerve-racking. The *Ür*-book of nerve-racking is *Jane: A Murder* about my aunt's murder. That book took eight years for me to make peace with the fact I was writing it. That book is a book that taught me about the bad idea. Every day, I would kind of come home from a movie or the library and I was like, *I shouldn't do it, I don't like it, it's scaring me.* And then I would go back and do it the next day. Sometimes it seemed like a good idea. Writing a book about the color blue seemed like a good idea and then I wrote it and it started to seem like a bad idea, given all the things that were flooding into me. I teach sometimes, and it's really scary for young writers to just commit. Nothing really sounds good in the abstract: *I'm going to write a book about heartbreak*. Everyone is like, *ugh, snore, tell me something I haven't heard*. It's only in the writing of it that a book becomes interesting, because it has to be a good book.

You've talked about your books as accidental. Do you see books you write as fated?
I guess I do, which is silly because they're fairly volitional. But often as you're finishing with one question you have usually produced another, just the way that you extrude clay through a hole. You got your piece but you left this big bunch of shit and then you want to make something, you go back to what you left behind. In that way to me, it feels like a fated flow, because I don't often invent. I don't clear out everything and go, *Oh, what in the whole world would I want to write about?*

When people ask how long a book takes to write, it's always a hard question. *The Argonauts* is 20 years of reading feminist and queer theory. When did I start writing it? I don't know! It couldn't exist. And with the color blue, I have been collecting blue things since I was 17. They feel fated to me in that way

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Writing is writing, right? You have to write the words, but there is so much thought. I wouldn't have been collecting blue things, if in the back of my mind I hadn't had the question: *What does beauty mean? What comfort do these blue things give me?* That was a difficult question that I might have asked when I was 18, collecting blue glass. I amend that question over time, by the time you go to write, you probably have a lot of thoughts about it without knowing you have.

With *The Art of Cruelty* and also *Jane* and *The Red Parts*, you often write about things that could be called "shocking," but you don't seem to want to shock or turn people away. Do you aim to be inclusive with your writing?

I don't think about aim very much, so it doesn't matter to me. People can be included or excluded. Some people might think my writing is really pornographic or sexual. People might think I'm incredibly reticent or prudish. I tend to surround myself with fairly extreme people; I enjoy them. I am often quite surprised if something seems shocking to people, which sounds coy. I really don't mean it to be; it's just the truth. So I think it's because of all those gradations of things, and because of subjectivity and response, depending on people's life experience, it would be a fool of an errand to include or exclude, because you are already trying to determine who might come to the party. And I think you just present the party and people can do what they want with it.

What a hostess attitude! I will take that metaphor as a literal guidance.

Eileen Myles was my teacher — she always talks about poems as parties and it really got under my skin. I think it's a lovely way of thinking. This is not what you're getting at per se, but there was a salon at Barnard that was done last year on *The Argonauts.* The opening conversation, which I thought was really interesting, was: Is there a place for black maternity within *The Argonauts*? I think about that question: How do you construct something that stays true to its autobiographical experience, in this case, but it feels spacious, so other experiences that don't match it exactly aren't getting warning signs that the party is closed? I am really fascinated by it. My partner Harry has a tattoo that says — it's from Édouard Glissant — on one arm it says, "Our boats are open"; on the other it says, "and we sail them for everyone." It's something we talk about a lot. How to make something very specific and very granular and very idiosyncratic, that somehow feels like an open boat? It's kind of a great mystery.