

Mother-Hooded by *Fayen d'Evie*

My son is eight-but-nearly-nine. When he was a baby, a friend asked me how I managed to find the time to keep making art. I responded with the closest thing to humour that my sleep-deprived brain could muster: “Just lower your standards - and keep lowering them.” It was a throwaway line, but I think there’s a brutal accuracy buried in there. I wish I could have labored over this writing for Noriko Nakamura’s exhibition *The force that the warrior adopts during the evolution of the pale pink rose*. I wish I could have spent days immersing in analysis of the Dogu figures that have spurred Noriko’s latest sculptural and painterly works. I wish I could have spent all weekend searching for precise adjective combinations to describe the meditative labour of stone carving. But the reality is that instead of rigorous scholarly analysis, I have had to compose this text in my head, while tidying away breakfast bowls crusted with weetbix, admiring lounge-room parkour that veered precariously close to an undusted collection of decorative vases, searching overflowing hampers of dirty washing to locate the one school uniform top that still fits, and excavating last week’s lunch box from a bag of Pokémon drawings.

I have learned that there are a few precious moments when I can sit and type my scattered thoughts: 5am, before the family wakes; 7pm, because I can shovel my soup in quickly and my son will reliably linger over dinner for longer than anyone could imagine possible; 1am, when all the family is asleep, and I can sit in relative peace, trying to recall the references I googled at lunchtime. You squeeze in what you can, when you can. “I learned to say no to all the unnecessary extra tasks that art industries expect artists to do,” texts Noriko. “I think art making is easy, there is time to go to toilet. Motherhood is hard, there is no time to go to toilet.”

Somehow, within the relentless cycles of breastfeeding and nappy changing, Noriko has found scattered moments to initiate a new drawing project: a series of tarot cards, rendered in watercolour washes. On the Strength card, a rotund baby suckles a multitasking sphinx who lies within an arc of activities: a laptop screen, a painting and pallet, an open book, a bowl of noodles at arm’s length. A sleeping cat hovers in the periphery, angel-like. “A newborn baby is so chaotic and the most useless animal ever. They don’t know how to latch onto the breasts in the beginning. They even don’t know how to sleep! Any other creatures know how to sleep but not human babies. I’m surprised that somehow humans didn’t go extinct in the primitive age because human babies are so hopeless. My cat Cinnamon has been so great to Rina. He is patient. He is our spiritual guide,” texts Noriko.

Ten years ago, Noriko and I bonded over brutal art school critiques and our mutual fear of Australia Day. During one devastating tutorial, she was told that to be a serious artist she needed to abandon her obsession with painting Cinnamon. A cat was not a suitable artistic muse. Fortunately, Noriko resisted. In the decade since, Cinnamon’s ways of knowing and being have offered a sustained conduit for Noriko’s contemplation of the transformative process of becoming-animal. Now baby daughter Rina has shifted the terrain to becoming-human. “I get so much from my baby everyday and I need to have an output to digest the experience, otherwise I would be conceptually constipated,” texts Noriko.

When Rina is napping, Noriko carries the baby monitor to the garage, where she carves totemic limestone sculptures with milk-heavy breasts and spiritual cat guides. She immerses in the time intensive work of stone carving, enjoying the sense of establishing a conversation and collaboration with the stone. This is not antithetical to the pull of motherhood to prioritise efficiency. She has learned to say no to the things she doesn’t want to do, and to prioritise the labour fundamental to her ways of knowing and being. Noriko carves intuitively, adjusting chisel strokes to work around shells embedded in the stone. She thinks of the dead sea creatures whose compacted bodies have formed the limestone. “In Shinto animism, we believe that something old has a stronger life force,” she texts.

The life force that is my son has just interrupted my writing. This is my norm, but this meta-context for the production of my writing is usually hidden from external view. Just as the diabolical mess of

our house is frantically tidied away when visitors are due to arrive, my published narratives are scrubbed clean, to give an outward semblance of control. But Noriko has asked me to write this text from the position of motherhood, so it seems fitting to transcribe Zeno's exuberant utterances, as he hops around me.

*Mum, can you lean against a wall, upside down, in a handstand, for a whole minute?
Mum, what does ominous mean? Mum, I've made the tallest tower ever, can you say what
you think of it, in Piglatin? Can you make me rice pudding? Can I have an apple? Mum, do
you know how to say 'Mrs Adam is fat' in Spanish? Mum, Mum, Mum, Mum, Mum, MUM!*

I last seven seconds of the wall stand. I come up with an inappropriate definition of ominous that implicates the Grim Reaper. I manage to both marvel and deflect in Piglatin (Owway, ouyay houldsay howsay uoryay addyday!) As I lurch with varying success through efforts at responsive mothering, I claim micro-seconds of pause between the rapid-fire demands for attention to rest my hand on one of Noriko's limestone sculptures that she gifted to me last Christmas, a spiritual talisman in the guise of a drinking goblet. I begin to compose the next sequence of this text in my head, honouring Noriko's public embrace of motherhood as fuel for artmaking: the good, the bad, the ugly. "I really like Claire Lambe's exhibition title *Mother holding something horrific*," texts Noriko.

Maggie Nelson writes of pregnancy queering the body via radical intimacy and radical alienation. As Noriko and I text back and forth, we enact the radical vulnerability and radical connectedness and radical isolation of mothering. We ask each other for help. But we seldom meet face-to-face. We trade crying emojis in the middle of the night and flower emojis in the morning. Noriko and I are both estranged from familial support, due to geographic distance, and in my case, grief. The consequence is the same: an absence of mothers or aunties or grandmothers that might have told us how to do this, how to survive this. So we cast about for maternal models of care. Noriko texts me Tai Snaith's podcast interview with Lou Hubbard. I tell her of a performance lecture that still possesses me, a recitation by Lucrecia Quintanilla and her son Ruben, as they learn the Lenca language together: "We will dance by the light of the moon. We will dance by the light of the moon. We will dance by the light of the moon."

Our children change us — and not just our sleep patterns, or the ways we pass time, or the ways we love, or our willingness to sacrifice, or our desires and longings. They change us at a cellular level. From six weeks into a pregnancy, cells from a foetus will travel across the placenta and into the mother's bloodstream, and then migrate into her tissues and organs: brain, heart, kidneys, lungs, spleen, liver. Most of the foetal cells are removed by the mother's immune system, but others stay within the mother's body for her lifetime. The colonising cells may play a manipulative role, diverting nourishment from the mother to the growing foetus, or they may have a restorative effect, boosting the mother's immune surveillance, repairing damaged tissue, and forming new blood vessels to heal wounds. Regardless, from early pregnancy, the mother has irrevocably transformed into a chimera: a body with the cells of at least two organisms. Stumbling onto this research through a chain of weblinks, I realise with a start that even the cells of the insect-sized baby I miscarried at eight weeks gestation are now fused inside of me. Noriko has not heard of the phenomenon of microchimeric cellular exchange when I text her a Smithsonian article, yet her paintings of masked Dogu figures bear a canny resemblance to iconic foetal-maternal hybrids. "OMG, who are we now? We are colonised! How do we decolonize?" Noriko texts.

*Noz, I'm sorry I didn't get to finish the essay. Zeno is desperate to show me a cool maths game
and is now hanging off me and squeeze-cuddling me and I just can't think anymore.
Is an unfinished draft good enough?*