

*There are moments when the body is as numinous as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.*

Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," 1979

1. A cloak of bones swallows a bearded figure, adorned with a crown of graphite. Volcanic blood oozes from tarantula legs. Lichen overtakes an elongated head, reminiscent of the ancient faces at Easter Island. Cocoons, ova, dirt, bats and bird wings, uncanny eyes peering out from the page. These bright and grotesque works by artist, Deborah Thompson, enrapture me in a world of freaky transformation.

The works in *Boat without a boat* (2025) depict figures in a dance of change. Beginning with the eyes, the bodies are drawn with pencil, paint, and paper, as if—and one must believe that the soul lives within the eyes—the artist has rendered the implicit energy of these beings through a process of mystic insight. When I asked, the artist reported that she doesn't know from where these faces came, though some of the faces are borrowed from Francisco Goya and Paula Rego, while others are hagish, regal, innocent, and emasculated. For Thompson, drawing is a mediator between the conscious and unconscious realms. The importance of these faces, I believe, is not their eyes alone, but how their expressions relate to their odd bodies, and how one must confront these anguished beings with their own body, in order to witness the work.

These creatures are androgynous, their features exaggerated and uncanny, fused to another being, a species unlike their own, sometimes animal, sometimes vegetable, sometimes the swelling sea. These are bodies on the verge, figures of otherworldly evolution meeting us here, on earth, in our reality, like omens for a time to come, or unconscious versions of ourselves we are forced to face. There's something uncomfortable about it: how unfamiliar they are, how almost-human-but-not-quite, that these beings are not totally one thing or another, rather, we witness them in the midst of change. Engulfed in the struggle between embodiment and transcendence, conscious and unconscious, human and animal, the artist's creatures engage us in a confrontation with ourselves as imperfect, grotesque, fractured beings, living in an impermanent world.

What does this work say about us, our spiritual and philosophical plights, about the journeys of transformation we all undergo in our lives? What are the evocations of the boat, as a metaphorical vessel, floating along a turbulent sea of change? There is the hope of another shore, the struggle for elsewhere; these desires make us human. If indeed we arrived at the other shore, how would we see the world differently?

*dig a grave in the sky there is plenty of room*

Paul Celan, "Todesfuge (Death Fugue)," 1948

2. Ten years ago, an image circulated through the press and across social media platforms: a three-year-old boy lay face down on a beach in Turkey, fully clothed, nose in the water,

body stiff. The image left something of a stain on my consciousness, perhaps as well, a stain on our collective humanity. The press called this image shocking, horrific, a tragedy, the plight of the refugees, a symbol of the atrocities of war. When I think, *without a boat*, I think about this boy journeying across the Mediterranean, when his “unseaworthy vessel” capsized, forcing him to float to shore, already dead.

Though across these works, the boat acts as a metaphor for transformation, an invisible vessel that traverses states of consciousness and being, there is another aspect to this, the literal implications of the boat, and the very real journeys that are taken every day, from shore to shore, journeys that have always been violent. This body of work began with a pencil drawing of Kenyan sailors packed into a boat, only their heads and paddles visible, a rendering that incited the artist’s interest in vessels as metaphor. The artist saw this drawing, yes, as a group of workers travelling by boat, but also as a single mythological being with many heads. I see the abject in this work as a representation of the abject in our culture, coalesced and mutated through the artist’s mind. Grotesque bodies unravel their form, bisect with animalia; a bird-faced feminine mirrors herself along a swan-like vertebra. While looking at this work, I feel my own sense of disgust, of fear and astonishment about the unfamiliarity of these bodies. And I feel a sense of renewal, that a new world order might be so carnivalesque, so queer and perverse as the imagination of the artist who has slashed open her paper to invent these forms.

As for the three-year-old Syrian boy, awash on the shore, a grave was dug in the sky, and his unseaworthy vessel sunk to its own grave at the bottom of the Aegean. What this boy represents is not the atrocity of war, the violence of transformation, a metaphor for the indelible horrors of humanity; what he represents is a life. Not an emblem for future peace, a life.

*may you open your eyes to water water waving forever and may you in your innocence sail through this and that*

Lucille Clifton, “blessing the boats,” 2000

3. Last night, I was feeling spiritually bereft. I wanted to cry, turn the radio off, close my laptop, mute my phone. Or better, make it all disappear, silence the fugue of immorality playing out all around me, the fascists, the racists, the xenophobes. What would I be left with, without the noise?

Out the window, a pile of brown and yellow leaves, picked apart by chickens, and here, rolled into my duvet cover, the downy cocoon of a small moth, nestled for the winter. There is the sky, dark blue, like the pooling of blood beneath skin. And in the distance, the teal-coloured water follows a path forged over millennia by the river. Stands of red osier dogwood lean towards the water, thickets of yellow grass shuffled by wind and deer. All of this, encased in darkness, was there last night. I just had to remember, deeply, that it exists, that I exist among it, as part of this strange and impossible web.

This work, these creatures, the artist's vision, is about migration—psychic, material, and spiritual migration. It is about dilemmas, flux, a change in consciousness. *Boat without a boat* is ontologically oriented towards the vessel, not the shore. After peering into these beings' eyes, perhaps their soul, and around their wings, cloaks, crowns, and bones, I wonder, what is at stake, as I'm suspended between the here and there. Who is allowed to make it, and, do we ever make it to the other side?

As I cradled myself in the darkness last night, aware of the river and the chickens, I whispered this, a prayer, a borrowed form I heard one night, uttered powerfully by a small poet speaking on the cross: *a way a way a way a way a light a way an egg a way a way a way a way a way a breath a way a song a way a way a way a way a way a light a way an eye a way a way a way a way a way a way a boat a way a light a way a light a way a light a way a light a way a boat a way*.