

On a Photograph by Paul D'Amato

[One image](#) from Paul D'Amato's ongoing photo-series *Water for the People* shows a young woman, possibly a teenager, lying face-up on the street. She's wearing a white cotton dress, her bare arms stretched to either side, supine on the asphalt. The street itself is flooded with water, half a foot deep, the woman near-enough submerged: feet bare, eyes closed, her dress both billowing and sticking to her opal skin. Her hands are floating on the surface of the water, catching the light of the late afternoon.

It's a photograph that flickers between peacefulness and horror. A moment of rest, of weightless calm, of sheer relief from the burdening heat. At the same time, it's all too easy to connect this picture to a site of tragedy or accident, to imagine – as is the case with so many photographs – the moments that led up to this, made all the more disturbing by the two boys half-cropped from the frame who seem to have no interest in the body floating at their feet. Isn't it curious, writes W. H. Auden in his poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts', considering Icarus's plunge into the sea, 'how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster[?]'

Almost thirty years after D'Amato took this photograph in 1993 – a different time, a different century – it's difficult not to catalogue this image alongside other recent photographs. We grow steadily accustomed to a new pictorial language of flooding, depicting stranded cars, abandoned streets, and cities newly paved with water. On top of this, every few years, we are invited to look (or not look) at the latest victims of the global migrant crisis – Alan Kurdi, Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter, and countless unreported others – washed up on the shores of countries closer, every time, to home. 'The photograph gives mixed signals,' suggests Susan Sontag: 'Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!'

D'Amato's photograph reminds me of [another spectacular image](#), hanging in London's Tate Britain gallery, spectacular in part because it shows a scene we're not supposed to witness. In *Hamlet*, we learn about the drowning of Ophelia from Gertrude, who describes the ending of her life – part accident, part suicide – to her weary older brother, Laertes, who has already lost his father to a stabbing in the play. We do not see the tragedy ourselves; it takes place somewhere off the stage. There's no photographer on hand to make a record of the scene for us. And yet, in John Everett Millais's painting, here she is, near-enough submerged: lips parted, eyes ajar, her dress both billowing and sticking to her opal skin. Her hands are floating on the surface of the water, clutching a garland of freshly picked flowers.

As is often said of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, there is a painstaking accuracy to the scenery and flora here, an attention to detail which borders on the far *too* real: everything in hyper-focus, not a single petal blurred. Completed in 1852, photography was in its infancy as Millais was working on *Ophelia*; painting still held its position as the medium best able to reproduce the contours of the natural world, truth on canvas.

All photographs ask questions about the nature of the spectacle, about what is worth looking at or worthy of our attention. It is the power of photography to transform even something as innocent and mundane as a young girl cooling off in the street into an image of profundity. Equally, photos often ask if there are some things that we shouldn't watch, even when recorded for the purposes of fact or truth. The role of the photographer, it turns out, is to invite these questions, not to answer them. If they come from anywhere, the answers come from careful looking, 'even if that answer,' writes Geoff Dyer, 'comes in the form of further questions.'