

The first time I saw Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" I was 14 years old. My History of Art professor pointed at the picture in the textbook and started talking about Dutch art and the Flemish Renaissance, but I wasn't listening. My eyes stayed on the corner of that image, on the two legs emerging weakly from the waters.

My mother had always been passionate about politics and social injustices. Just a couple of weeks prior she had shown me the excruciating image of a two-year-old boy, with a bright red shirt, faced down on a pebbled beach in Lampedusa, dead.

"Aylan Kurdi" she had said, eyes filled with tears and anger in her voice, "Remember his name. It could have been you." She told me about what she called "the refugee crisis" in the Mediterranean. About plastic boats and people dying not too far from our shores, without anyone doing anything about it.

That's when I learnt that art has always something to say about the world we live in, even if it was produced centuries ago. Because when I saw Icarus in Bruegel's painting, I found myself thinking about Aylan. Years later, when I read Auden's "Musée des Beaux-Arts", I realised that maybe that was the reason I had always been attracted to art. Paintings, sculptures and poems all tell two different kinds of stories: the one the author intended, and the one the lines and the colours speak to us, and only to us.

These are the two stories I see in Bruegel's painting.

Mare Nostrum,
(in 'Landscape with the fall of Icarus')

Colours and lines and silences and colours and lines and
Colours and lines and silences And colours and lines and
You've been staring for a while. The
gallery is silent, and you seem to expect
something. I can only stare back at you.
I have stories to tell, but know no words.
We speak colours and lines and silences.
You have words to say, but no story to
tell. Come closer, and we'll lend you mine.
And colours and lines and Colours and lines and
Colours and lines and silences and colours and lines and

I.

The boy comes to me twice.

The first time, it catches me by surprise. The bay stands silent, unmoving, uneventful. It's the first month after summer. You can tell by the colours. Not aquamarine hues, but teal. Just a hint of green – a reflection of evergreens on the coast. And not cerulean skies, nor crimson sunsets, but slate grey, faded, far away clouds. I sit, like a mirror.

These days, I don't take an interest in the lives of men. Every once in a while, a fisherman's face peeks over me and I offer his image back to him. A shepherd's sheep gets too close to my edges, and I have to push my waves loudly against the cliffs, to scare it away. *Don't get too close, innocent one. You might fall in.* The ships await. Even the wind seems to be resting. The leaves on the trees are immobile, as the seagulls on the shores. A framed scene, still, painted in time.

If images had sounds, you'd now hear a scream. Maybe you wouldn't see him coming, but you couldn't close your ears to it. A child of man. Falling from the sky. Tender flesh, golden skin, aquamarine eyes and never, in my eternal time on earth, I had seen a man with wings. The feathers come first. They start dropping, one after the other, floating softly, cradled by the current. The wax raining in heavy drops. I would have moved if I had seen him coming. I would have raised, one enormous wave, to meet him halfway.

But the scream lasts less than a second. His body doesn't even fight. I wish I could show you how he lies on the sand, with evergreen kelps and lightless waters. His washed away flesh, slate grey skin, teal irises. On the shore, all the eyes turned away the moment he fell. The fisherman's. The shepherd's. The captain's.

From afar, a voice starts crying his name.

Icarus

Icarus

Icarus

Icarus

II.

He catches me by surprise the second time as well.

He looks down at me from his inflatable boat, and I recognise him. I keep his image for myself, taking in the shades of his reflection. Burnt flesh, olive skin, charcoal eyes veiled with a watery mask. He doesn't seem happy to see me. And neither am I. We are far from the bay where I first met him. The men on shore speak a different language that sometimes sounds like excuses and hate, sometimes like tears and pity. They are all still there. The fisherman sailed back to shore the moment he saw the grey ashy clouds covering the sun in the sky. He stands next to the shepherd, in the harbour, who is telling the people around him to pray. Pray for what, is not clear. The captain stands, eyes on my waves, waiting. They saw the boat. They all did. I wait for them to do something. The sky goes from steel blue to slate grey, the sun on the horizon a weak flame about to expire. A lightning in the sky flashes white light on the boy's face and he cries. *Where is your mum. Where is your land. Where is the captain with his iron boat.* I rise, I do. I try to push his boat to shore before the rain and the wind get to him. But not even I am strong enough. I rise, one enormous wave, but the wind pushes the other way. The boat capsizes and I can't. I can't. *I can't help you.*

This time, I don't hide him. When the rain ceases, I cradle him softly to the shore. I lay him on the pebbles of the beach, a thousand different shades of brown – umber, hickory, carob – and I stay with him, caressing his skin, asking for forgiveness. From the harbour, all the eyes turned away the moment he fell. The fisherman's. The shepherd's. The captain's.

From afar, a voice starts crying his name.

Aylan

Aylan

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Aylan