

2019

Water Damage

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Alexis (2019) "Water Damage," *The Laureate*: Vol. 18 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol18/iss1/8>

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Water Damage

Alexis Smith

“Oh, this is pretty good. What’s this piece called again?”

“*Tea with Mermaids.*”

“Right. Well, it’s a fitting title, for sure.”

“Mhmm.”

The oil painting, (which she now thought should have been watercolor), was drying in the painter’s studio, almost ready to go on display at the local gallery. She finished it that morning, and despite all four windows being propped open, the acrid smell of the oil still saturated the stale air. Her mother went to the studio only to collect the painter for breakfast, but now she stood stagnant and stared into the painting rather than at it. Her mother had never inspected one of her pieces like this before.

“Stop biting your fingernails.”

“I wasn’t.”

The mother only shook her head. “You didn’t get Quinn’s hair right.”

“What? Who said that was Quinn?”

“I mean, he wasn’t *that* blonde.”

Well sure he was before the water spit him back onto the stone shore with hair like sallow straw and with his skin scraped by the sand but don’t worry anyway Mom this little boy in the painting is alive and it’s not Quinny it’s not Quinn it’s not—

The painting displayed two children, a girl skinny with prepubescence and a boy who had not yet lost his baby fat. They were in a grotto drinking tea with three mermaids who had black hair long enough to tangle in their tails, which were swirled with odd grays and greens. One was whispering into the little boy’s ear, one was peering into the teapot with the opaque tip of her tail in front of the girl’s face and the third was holding a teacup at a distance so that the light from the pool would reflect off it at different angles. There were rippled trails in the water that showed the gentle movement of the mermaid’s fins and the water was lit from light beyond the O-shaped mouth of the cave.

His fingers dipped in the water, reflecting the opalescent light onto the grotto walls. “It’s not working.”

“Here, you have to swirl your fingers like this. That way they know we are calling them.”

“It’s still not working.”

“Here, try offering them the tea set. I hear mermaids like human things.”

Shaking her head out of the daze, the daughter replied, “It’s just a boy, Mother.”

“That’s my tea set.”

“What?”

Her mother leaned in and, despite her daughter’s cringe, touched her finger to the painting itself. “You got it right down to the chipped handle. How did you remember it that well? I haven’t thought about that tea set in years.”

Arms crossed and back hunched towards the painting, her eyes widened as she recognized that she had, as her mother said, replicated the white-blue tea set. She reached for her mother’s hand and pulled it away from the teacup’s handle and began to blend the mistake back to its original, delicate shape. “It’s the little things I guess.”

Little like his hands reaching into the water, plunging his palms into the brown-red mud beneath the surface.

“Do you see the mermaids, Quinny?”

“—the mermaids?”

“Sorry, what?”

“I was asking what made you want to color the mermaids that way?”

Oh the colors just reminded me of his gray swollen skin and how it was soft enough for the fish to pick off layers at a time and how his eyelids were so thin and bruise-blue but really it was just a painting of two kids and who said it was about Quinn anyway—

“I don’t know, Mom. I just sat down and picked colors.” She started for the door. “It’s almost nine and I’m starving, let’s go.”

“Is this the grotto that was near our first house?”

“Mother, please.”

Her mother stood on her toes and leaned close enough to the painting that the painter wondered if she was going to fall in.

Did he fall in? Did he try to swim underneath and escape the grotto? Was he trying to find the mermaids?

“Maybe he *was* that blonde.”

“Oh please, you’re making something out of nothing, like always.” She moved closer to her mother. “Let’s just go to breakfast, please.” She reached for her shoulder.

Her mother rocked back to her heels, turned towards her daughter and smiled, “You guys must have had so much fun down there.” Her pupils were so large that for a moment the daughter forgot what color her eyes—“*You were supposed to keep an eye on your brother*”—were supposed to be.

“Mom.”

Her mother’s palm touched where the mermaid’s cupped hand met the little boy’s ear—“*Quinny, wanna hear a secret?*”—and she smiled larger. She hadn’t noticed that blue oil was starting to dye the skin on her fingers.

“*Ooh, a secret? What? What is it?*”

“*There are mermaids in the grotto.*”

“*You mean it? Can I see?*”

“*You gotta lean in real close to see them.*”

“Mom, can we—”

“*—play with your old tea set?—*”

“*—go now?*”

“Do you think the mermaids were real?” her mother asked, leaning her head against the painting. “Do you think he met mermaids while he was down there?” Where the mother’s tears fell, the oil began to soften and bleed in thin streaks that rose and bubbled like foam.

Oh, something with scales came to see him Mother but it wasn’t the mermaids and you know that you’re just in denial yes you’re just going crazy I didn’t paint us in the grotto and it’s just some kids and some mermaids it’s just something I made up I’m an artist and artists make things up all the time and it isn’t Quinn I swear and I only left him alone for a second Mom only a second—

“No, Mom, I don’t think mermaids are real.”

“Then stop painting them.” Her mother’s smile flatlined as she pulled her green stained cheek from the painting.

She drew in a small breath as she watched her mother lift the canvas from its easel, her palms blurring the oil on the edges.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“No, I don’t think you are.” She caressed the painting. “When was this supposed to go on display again?”

“Does it matter?”

Her mother kept her wide eyes on *Tea with Mermaids* while she held it towards the ceiling, just for a few heartbeats, before throwing it down, and knocking over the easel and stool where her brushes and paint water were collected.

The easel collapsed on the ground with a *clap*, the stool with a *thump*, and the scattering glass shards from the jar that held her brushes rang with an echo. Her shoulders fell with the plastic cups that toppled over and poured gray paint water all over the front of the canvas. She watched the children and the mermaids blend—*bleed*—together before shifting her shaking hands from her ears to her face.

“But I am. I’m sorry.”

“Good.” Her mother began to walk away.

I’m sorry Mom I had to pee and when I came back he was gone I guess he was already sinking towards the bottom but how could I know that I didn’t know if he was kidding or not I saw the bubbles rising but they were slow Mom they weren’t frantic at all they were small like him and there were no waves no sign of struggle so I thought it was a joke yes just a joke that silly Quinny was playing on me so I just waited for him like he said he would wait for me like how he said he would wait till I came back to have tea with the mermaids so I just waited for him and the teacup that fell in with him to float back up and I even swirled my fingers in the water so he knew I was calling him but he didn’t come back and what was I supposed to do I screamed and screamed and I really did faint Mom I was so scared but you were so mad—

“I’m not hungry anymore, let’s just go for coffee instead,” her mother said, paused at the door.

She removed her hands from her face and locked her gray eyes with her mother's green ones. "I don't want coffee."

The mother turned toward the sink basin and began to wash her face and hands and allowed a moment of silence to sink between her daughter and the soaked canvas. The painter counted all twelve of her sable brushes that littered the tiled floor, three of them splintered and one broken right in half. The stool had scraped most of the oil off of the lower right hand corner and the hip of one of the mermaids, but it managed to miss the children. However, the water spilled directly on their faces, and caused the oil to merge the children's hands with the teapot. The dark shades of the grotto ceiling were all that remained undamaged. The painter knelt beside her creation and ran her fingers along the edges of the canvas.

"Why did you do that?"

"Leave it." Her mother's nails dug into her shoulders and she was lifted back to her feet.

"Let me go." The grip on her shoulders only tightened as her mother turned her away from the painting.

"You're going to walk out of here with me, we are going to enjoy some coffee, and you're never going to paint him again." She led her out of the front door of the gallery.

"I don't want coffee," she repeated.

The wind slammed the gallery door behind them and the mother released her grip.

"We'll have tea, then."