

The Artists

By Ashley Rummel

“Art is a man’s nature; nature is God’s art.” — Philip James Bailey

The stream of paper cranes, dangling from the ceiling on red thread, fluttered as Professor Cooper breezed through the doorway. Elliot watched them, chewing her cheek as their crisp, white wings rustled together. A flurry of paper cuts and flapping origami birds.

“Good morning,” Professor Cooper sighed. Her bag slumped onto her desk, and she rifled through the contents. Elliot turned her gaze from the birds to the art studio, bathed in morning light. Across from her, Arden stifled a yawn, half asleep on her easel. Pink paint clumped a strand of her chopped black hair — this wasn’t the first time she’d fallen asleep on her paintings. Next to her, Milo’s pen circled over and over and over, tracing the same black shape with wet ink. Perhaps the start of one of his ‘abstract’ pieces, more likely something born from boredom. Hudson’s stool was unsurprisingly empty. Late again. And Gigi stared at Professor Cooper, thin shoulders hidden inside an oversized cardigan, a finger of steam waving off the coffee cup cradled in her hands.

Professor Cooper pulled her computer out of her bag, sliding it on the desk. The bangles on her wrist jingled as she fiddled with the cords, her eyes casting up to gaze about the room. “Is Hudson late again?”

Milo nodded absently, silver earring catching and throwing the light. Gigi sat up straighter. “I think he’s on his way. Traffic this morning.”

Professor Cooper hummed in agreement. The projector clicked on, lighting the screen in color. Elliot squinted, the artificial light harsh compared to the soft wash of the morning. A stool screeched as someone adjusted their chair.

“Well.” Professor Cooper brushed her bangs from her face. “It’s been a morning. And I—”

The doors flew open.

Hudson rushed to his chair, hair damp on the roots, flip flops clapping on the tile. He kept his head tucked down. Murmuring “traffic” before dumping his backpack off one shoulder.

“Now that we’re all here,” Professor Cooper continued. “I’d like to introduce our final project. I know you’ve all been waiting patiently—”

They hadn’t. Elliot had four other finals to worry about.

“— but I promise it’s worth the wait.”

She clicked the next slide, and Elliot read the pastel screen with a frown.

“Nature?” Milo asked. He raised one of his thick brows. “That’s it?”

Professor Cooper met each student’s eyes with a sparkle in her own, and Elliot looked down when she did.

“I want you each to create your best piece. A piece inspired by nature. That *is* nature. Memorialize all the wonder we’re losing so fast in our urbanized world.” She paused, letting the words settle like dust. “And then they’ll be presented in the Winvalley Art Show.”

“You’re shitting me,” Milo muttered. Gigi gasped, clasping her hands over her mouth. Arden finally woke up. Only Hudson stared at Professor Cooper unimpressed.

Elliot glanced up at the paper cranes. Memories tumbled through her mind like falling rocks, unearthing idea after idea. She blinked. Stared at her blank canvas.

“How long do we have?” she asked. Voice hardly a whisper. Never louder. She pulled her sleeves further over her hands, trying to cover her fingers stained by charcoal.

“Two weeks,” Professor Cooper announced. The joy sucked up. Milo muttered “shit”, and Gigi’s shoulder’s fell. Elliot closed her eyes, already exhausted. Professor Cooper stood up with a clap. “Oh, perk up. It’s the Winvalley—”

“*Two weeks*,” Gigi said. “How are we supposed to—”

Milo snorted, “You don’t really expect us to make our best art that quickly.”

“Professor, with all respect...” Arden said.

Hudson slid off his stool, with a sigh. “We better get moving.”

Elliot looked at her blank canvas as the room startled into a rushed chaos. Brushes clinked in tin cups, water sloshed over bowls, stools scuffed the floor. Elliot felt eyes on her and turned.

Gigi glanced at Elliot’s blank canvas. “Lucky you,” she muttered. “This’ll be an easy one.”

Elliot knew they were all thinking it. Who was the one who always did scenes of nature? Waterfalls. Lakes. Forests. Mountaintops. Each with their own twist, sure, but all with the same pattern. Nature. Still, Gigi’s words tugged at her skin like a needle. Pierced her pale flesh. Pearled blood on the surface.

Was art ever easy?

No. No, Elliot didn’t think it was.

Twelve Days Before The Showing

Hudson Hayes

The Sea Takes All, 2023

Oil on Canvas

The idea came to Hudson first. The waves. The house's chipped white wood. The sand. Always the sand. You could never get away from it. It collected in the bottom of their porcelain showers, snuck between the seams of shirt hems, dusted the rims of their sunglasses. It was everywhere, but it never stayed.

Hudson's fingers grazed the canvas' rough surface, bumping over each ridged fiber. The past two classes he'd sketched a myriad of things. Playing with ideas, turning over glossy magazine pages, folding a leaf inside of his notebook. Nothing had sparked. And then on his way to campus this morning, passing the same neighborhood park he always passed, he noticed the sandbox. The waves crashed in his mind. The beach house flooded back.

It was nature, wasn't it?

He stenciled the image he wanted, the paint dark on the canvas. Castles, made of sand but so detailed they looked like the real thing. Spires made of screw shells, the windows inlaid with chipped sea glass, the moat filled with tidal foam. Then the wave. Frothy, dark, and seething from the depths of the ocean, as it crested up around the castle's walls. Breaking against its back, the sand of a thousand castles before it already caught in its waters. Class ended, and his classmates packed up their brushes, put away their paints, stacked their still blank canvas, but Hudson was already sucked in deep. Drowning in the waters of his imagination and memories. That was the first lesson he learned from the sea. Build what you want, but it will take it all back. Nothing lasts forever.

Not the sandcastles. Not his grandparents. Not even the beach house. The sea took all.

Ten Days Before The Showing

Arden Martinez

Homesick, 2023

Multi-medium

Arden couldn't remember the last time her feet touched the grass. Below her, the spears folded under her toes, tickled the soft skin of her soles. The park smelled damp. Earthy. Like dirt under your fingernails. She plucked a strand of the grass, rolling it between her fingers until it stained them green. Her notebook looked out of place here. Pages too white, too clean. The graphite covering them too intentional. Arden rolled onto her stomach, feet kicking up into the air. A bird chirped above her and a bike's tire crunched the gravel path a few yards away.

Nature. Of course that had to be the theme Professor Cooper chose for their final project. Didn't she know how little they saw nature these days? There wasn't time to name the clouds, or point out constellations, or watch the tiny bugs that wandered between blades of grass. Arden's life consisted of a rotating series of four walls. Her apartment. The art studio. Lecture halls. Coffee shops. The little time she was under the great blue bowl of the open sky was spent shuffling to and from another set of four walls. But she'd wasted nearly a week of their precious time chasing dead end ideas. Nothing stuck, so she returned to the source.

Surprise was the best emotion to describe what she felt. Time passed so quickly when she just stopped and watched the scurrying little critters, bugs smaller than the nail on her pinky finger. Tears dampened her bottom lashes. Never enough to drip down her cheeks, but enough to give physicality to the thickness in her chest and the stirring of her heart. Home wasn't something she'd felt in a long time. But here, watching the grass tremble with a quiet wind,

watching a tiny jumping spider dart from blade to blade, she felt like a kid again. Everything else could pause.

And Arden knew what she was going to make.

Eight days before the showing

Milo Young

The Origins, 2023

Installation

“The theme is fucking *nature*,” Milo said, stabbing his chopsticks into his lo mien. The mall’s cafeteria buzzed with noise, the plasticky, glowing red of the Panda Express sign casting onto their table. Milo trapped a noodle before it slipped through the chopsticks. “I mean, what am I supposed to make? You know my art, man.”

Hudson nodded absently. A piece of broccoli dropped onto the pile of noodles on Milo’s plate. He asked, “Do you want me to get you a fork?”

“I can do this,” Milo muttered. He looked up, chopsticks sticking up from his fist. “What are you painting anyway?”

“The ocean.”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about. You take some great artist like you and make them paint the ocean or some shit. Like that’s never been done before.” Milo ran a hand over his shaved head and stared down at his plate. He sighed. “I quit. You want somethin’?”

“I’m good.”

Milo grabbed the plastic wrapped forks from the dispenser, walking back to the table. Ripping open the crinkled wrapping, he stabbed into his lo mien. Stuffing his mouth, he began again. "I could... make this plate...into the best damn painting...you've ever seen." He swallowed. "You know why? 'Cause I can make it abstract. 'Cause it's inspiring. I don't see a tree and have lightning strike. I'm not fucking Elliot."

"None of us are."

"Does Cooper just want us to look bad?"

"I wonder what she's painting," Hudson said.

Milo's brow creased. "Who?"

"Elliot. She's been gone from class all week."

"You think it's somethin' secret?"

"Don't know."

Milo took another bite, chewing and swallowing his food before he talked again.

"Probably just another waterfall or some crap."

"Probably," Hudson shrugged. He pushed aside a carrot to get to a piece of orange chicken. "So you don't have any ideas?"

"Think Cooper'd let me show a white canvas?"

"You'll find something, man," Hudson said. "Just look around you."

Milo did. The shining linoleum floors, the plastic chairs, the too-green mall plants. Clothing drooped on a mannequin: a leather jacket, a wool hat, a polyester vest. A kid clutching a Build-a-Bear. *Rewind*. A ruffled pink dress. A horrible pantsuit. A pair of winking earrings. Where did all the clothes come from? Who made them? What did they start as? Milo snapped.

"You got it?" Hudson asked.

The chair squealed back. Milo picked up his lo mein and dumped it in the trash.
Lightning webbed inside his skull. Connecting, connecting, connecting.

“Come on, man,” he said, waving towards Hudson.

“Where are we going?”

“The studio.”

Six days before the showing

Gigi Bartlett

Us vs Kings, 2023

Acrylic on canvas

Gigi gave up.

She attacked the paper stretched before her with hands slathered thick with paint. Colors she could hardly see because she'd stormed straight to the canvas without turning on the lights. Outside, the sun was dying behind the campus buildings. Inside, she raged.

The tears began then. Dripping freely from her lashes, her cheeks splotched and red. She swiped her pushed sleeve under nose, standing back to look at the paint ravaged canvas. As hideous as she thought.

Just like everything she'd managed to 'create' in the past week.

Then the door clicked. The lights flicked on and Gigi sniffed. She didn't feel like hiding the tears. Not tonight.

“Gigi.” It was Arden. Gigi closed her eyes. *Go away.* She willed. *Please, just go away.*

“Gigi, hey. What happened?”

Her throat was too tight for words. They came out as a pitiful sob instead. Gigi tried to wipe away the tears, but her hands were still covered in paint. She was ridiculous. Pathetic. And look what she'd done. Arden set down her tote bag on a nearby stool, her voice, typically so harsh and sharp, now a coo.

"Hey," she said. She took Gigi's arms, the paint dribbling down them slick on her hands, and brought them from her face. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm awful at this," Gigi choked. "I'm just—" She looked at her painting. The one streaked with her hands. With the emotions that poured out of her, ugly and weak.

Gigi shook her head. Her throat was raw. God, she was such a failure.

Arden glanced at the painting. "It's not bad." Then, she disappeared, returning with a bucket of palette knives which she set beside the smeared acrylic. "When you're ready."

Gigi stared at the mess she'd created, knowing if she was going to salvage anything from the harsh reds, blacks, and yellows, it'd have to be a background. Though what to fill it? She glanced at Arden's work station, scattered with a shoelace, nerf gun dart, pebbles, and feathers. Shame heated her cheeks. She didn't have the temperament to design her usual art: classic stuff with heavenly clouds and pastel palettes. Instead, she looked outside the window, only to see a shadow wandering from the neighboring building, dragging something across the lawn.

"Is that Elliot?" Gigi asked. Arden's hand froze over her canvas as she followed Gigi's gaze. Then, she frowned.

"What's she carrying?"

"It looks like a camera."

The girls watched until the shadow disappeared, their brows crossed. Arden was the first to speak. "What do you think she needs a camera for?"

“Something spectacular,” Gigi whispered, ashamed at her own jealousy. She looked back to her painting as if she could will it into a masterpiece. Something she was proud of. Anger curled her fists at the unfairness of it all. No matter how much she studied or practiced techniques, she’d never have the raw genius.

She picked up the paintbrush. Stepped out of her mind and began to trace the lines she saw. A snake at first. Then something else. Rage. Fight. A battle.

Gigi kept painting until she’d won.

Twelve hours before the showing

It was surprisingly easy to break into the gallery. The street lamps cast a greasy yellow glow on the pavement outside as Elliot dragged her standing camera to the center of her parking lot before heading in. Her bag thumped against her thigh, supplies light.

She flicked on the studio’s lights, not afraid of getting caught. They’d all be here soon enough. Setting her bag in the center of the room, she let her eyes adjust to the harsh, white glare. Her classmates' artwork lay before her.

Hudsons’ an oil painting with waves crashing into the back of a sandcastle.

Arden’s a mixed web of glistening grass, chrysalis, and childhood toys.

Milo’s manikin, jeans fading to teased, dyed fibers, to unspooled cotton, and leather jacket dissolving into a cow’s back.

Gigi’s acrylic scene of a mongoose facing down a king cobra.

Elliot crossed her arms across her chest, feeling the cold of the fans whirring above her as she walked slowly from work to work. For a moment, she debated. Did she have to do this? Would it be worth it? Would they understand?

And yet, when she looked at them she couldn't help but see something different.

Hudson's ocean was an island of floating trash. Arden's backyard was an infestation of urban sprawl. Milo's clothing was heaps of fast fashion worn only once or never at all. Gigi's mongoose was just another species threatened by habitat loss.

"You're all so talented," she said. Paused. "I'm sorry."

Delicately, she took the paintings from the walls and rolled the manikin across the floor. She opened the door outside, leading each one out. A solo march. The parking lot's gravel crunched under her boots. The paintings looked so small here. Just canvas, four square edges, sallow under the streetlamp. When she'd stacked the last one, like logs in a fireplace, she stood back. The wind brushed the hair from the nape of her neck, its fingers a cold caress on her skin.

It wasn't too late. She knew that. Not for the paintings at least, but that wasn't what she was trying to say. This only worked one way.

Finger's shaking, she took the matches from her bag. The stars winked above, the moon the only witness.

"Forgive me," she whispered. Taking a match from inside, she swiped it against the side of the matchbox. A spark twisted to life. Orange, pulsing, eat away the wood until it curled into a single black twig. Heat bit Elliot's fingers and she shook it out and started again. *You have to do this.*

This time when the match lit, she threw it. The flame caught the cotton cuff of Milo's installation first. Black smoke twisted in the air and Elliot swallowed. She shook her can of red

spray paint, and across the gravel she wrote nine uneven words. *Art is a man's nature; nature is God's art.*

It was a good thing she'd taken the art outside.

It was a good thing the ground was still wet.

Her words caught fire, the paint burning quick and fast.

Behind it, the installation blazed, the flames catching and curling the paper. Spitting up the paint and boiling where Hudson had laid it on too thick. Plastic on Arden's canvas oozed across Gigi's as her acrylic hardened, cracked, and crumbled to dust. Sparks swept up to the night, the stars catching the embers. And Elliot watched, her camera blinking as her classmates' art went up in flames.

Nature, Professor Cooper had told them. But wasn't this the most natural thing of all. What started most wildfires? What leveled forests and melted glaciers? What destroyed all it touched? This was nature too, just a different side of it.

Ashes brushed across the words she'd painted red. Her title plate lay in them, pulsing with heat like an ember.

Elliot Reyes

Performative

Human Nature, 2023