First Place

“Simple Machines”

Gaia Rajan
Mason, Ohio
Simple Machines
At eleven, I stole a lisp from my parents—slipped
past silent seams of brick, past slouching yards

and surveilling fields, past the stray dog still wearing
its owner’s collar, past the trappings of dead

animals and the splintering lanterns in perfect
hunting lodges, past the people and their economies

of sweat and the gym called Manifest Your Destiny
into the speech classroom’s projector spotlight. There’s more steel

in English than you would believe. In my textbooks,
men invented new machines to turn people

into ghosts, to sheathe all senses in fresh
blood. The woman in speech class asked all

who hadn't broken their mouths yet to circle
the nouns. Mark the verbs. Buck the horse. Stolen

accent evidence of stagnancy. A cycle
of innovation: pulley into crank into guillotine.

The inventions grew more beautiful, more
deadly: artful casket, gorgeous cage. I learned

how to speak so they could ruin me, an imitation
of a voice. All of this is progress. I excelled

in speech class, my mouth rinsed out clean with white
heat, controlled vocabularies of so much blood. On days

I can't speak, this is where I go: interrogation
room, gunmetal smile. Grateful machines. The coldest tongues.
Second Place

“Etymology of Loss”

Olivia Yang
Charlotte, North Carolina
Etymology of Loss

The day my mother died, I opened my copy of the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* for the first time. I stroked each page, the soft fur of age glistening between my fingers. Perhaps

*the deepest reason why we are afraid of death is that we do not know who we are.* It is time now to admit my mother’s death to be two deaths, the first in her chamber of body, the second in a glass room in my mind. Her departure left a silence underneath the trembling of my skin, which swallowed grief as quickly as a reassurance that this was anything but finality. I want to think of death as a metaphor about empty space. Yet even a ghost will gnaw at its coffin. When it’s packed too tightly together, there’s a thickness to dust. I'd never noticed before. Like the birth day cake I ate at seven -- a diabetic sweetness smudged in icing, recoiling from the skin of my throat. I drag the knife across glazed flesh tenderly, as if to rouse the body slumbering beneath frosted casing. A sprig of pale lily rests on my platter - no, wilts upon a coffin. The light goes out. The flicker of an exhausted wick lingers, butane licking the corners of my mother’s withering lilac lips. I cannot remember if she was there to witness the feast. What does death do with the body it discards? The same that we do with the things we do not want. Mother, when I try to capture your face, I can only remember your cheekbones outlining a mouth downturned, flushed in the rouge of anger. When I try to grieve, I open the same book and highlight with a pen the words that can border you in your wake -- a cold body still stuck, clinging onto caking ash. But what is this? A revival? Or an erasure?
To contain you, I created a room
which was also a ghost. The distance between
you and I -- faceless. I keep forgetting
empty space can also be a door
and even now, I wish I could enter
and exit freely.
But I know this is not an elegy
for I still do not know the words
that can contain you.
Third Place

“Photosynthesis”

Olajuwon Abdullah Adedokun
Lagos/Alimosho/Igando, Nigeria
Photosynthesis

What my Biology teacher says:
A plant growing needs light,
& light could be white, or
burning red or Rose green,
or the sunset on a glowing skin,
but light can never be ember black
or greyish ashes of a burnt skin.

We wear silence around our necks
and crawl out of bed into bleaching creams,
to be able to trap light on our tongues,
blame the unshreded remnants of our
inherited sins for every bad dream.

It’s what we name hope, & at the
playground in school argue who
is becoming an Oyinbo faster,
I learn American English, practice
sticky syllables on my cracked tongue
because my language has no
name for a broken boy.

*Oyinbo means foreigner in Yoruba