

1st Place:

Lara Katz

Weston, Connecticut

of arc

that man
he was a woman, with
cropped hair and cobwebbed
words that illiterate woman
she fought a court to
remain single she in
drag brought men to
war horse to water they
drank they drank deep

that girl
won a war dressed in
white that peasant commanded
a dauphin and he obeyed
like a dog that virgin
at nineteen she became ash
before her own funeral
that life
that swift.

2nd Place:

Miracle Thornton

Interlochen, Michigan

praise dance

i close my legs. i'm starting to smell
like a woman and the other girls can tell.

they spread wide and bend forward and
breathe giggles into the floor. they're clean

like african soap newly unsealed, talking in
street clicks, a mother's cadence, about pastor's

son, who i am in love with, about the way
he feels. they quip about how he kissed

sharp like a punishment in back room off the
narthex. *i felt him with my foot*, says a brother's

daughter and other girls shiver with her pride.
sister comes to open me up and my jealousy

reeks like cabbage, pungent as my new found
body. she roils at their lust and the whip of her

tongue sends a hush through the church attic,
her grip on my thighs strict, hot pepper breath

down my neck like the lick of a flame.

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we balance on the ball, my crooked ankles
spurred out and trembling. the girls step on my

feet to make my arch collapse. they don't ask
me where it hurts and i don't bother to tell them.

take me to the king and we carve lazily for Him,
our palms drawn upward, so open

i can't breathe. this is just practice and afterward
the girls start to dance for the boys straight out

of bible study. the pastor's son humors

a pew stain but the others are enraptured.

i don't try to talk to him. i'm blanched with fear,
sister's absent mouth gnawing at my ear.

i watch the girls ripple, their laughs tart like
collard greens, dressed still in paneled white tunics

slick over their black curves. one of the boys begins
to beat on the altar, a rhythm that makes me want

to grind into my seat. the girls' hips clock against one
another. it's aggressive. terrifying. the pastor's son

passes me by on his way to the door.

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sister danced for her husband the day before she left.
he told her to change the song. on stage, she's

violent for the Lord, her salted curls frayed
around her jaw, body sharp, sternum bulging in

devotion.

3rd Place:

Layla Wheelon

Charleston, South Carolina

Self Portrait as Kudzu

I.

Mama was nineteen, barely
a woman, barely knew how
to wear her hair. To wrangle
the lion mane. It engulfed her
silhouette, made her face
seem small.

Nineteen and I wound myself around her insides and
spread. Hogging her chocolate shakes
and constructing myself from grease-
soaked hash browns, like swallowing up
sunstreams. I imagine she found out
she was expecting without

knowing to expect clinging arms and a plum-soft
head. I imagine she felt the plummet deep
within her bones. Wept. Prayed
to God, no. *Another day*, she tells me
when I ask how she reacted.
The photos document the invasion, my arrival

via foreign object detected, and the virgin-
white expanse of her stretched to hold

I imagine she cherished her belly
ring, how it glittered and recalled
bikini afternoons, before the other
rings. Before I clambered to fill her

uterus, before body swollen.

The ultrasound revealed my leaf-palms,
that black velvet vine tethering me to her.

Once I sucked all the nutrients she had
inside to offer, I climbed
out of womb and into arms.

II.

Now I spill from the toddler
bed, the top bunk, shoot out
of the back room that stays warm
in the summer. Immune to
frosts. Eventually, I know my mosaic of
roots will puncture pipes, and so I picture

Mama in another house,
in what could have been
a two-story brick with lilies planted nice
and neat on either side of the drive. Hand-
picked, wrestled into clusters of color.
She would cradle

the bulbs in her palms, caked black and wet
with earth. My mama in another place, as another
person, dancing at nineteen not in white wedding
lace but a graduation gown, floor-length and light.
Yet this was not my doing; I was no lead weight.
She carved out a space for me within

herself, and all I could do was fill it. Devour
drywall, the hydrangeas out front, until I am draped
over family photos like smoke. Mama reduced
to mere silhouette beneath, her spine growing bent.
Eventually, I will blot out all light from my family.
But what else was I to do but spread?