

THE FRANCINE RINGOLD AWARDS
Poetry Prize



FINALIST
JACQUELINE ALNES

stroke: breast/back/any

meet your maker the superintendent jokes
when he introduces coach

as if we need another god

get on in there, girls
coach winks

under fluorescents
we are pool-soaked thighs

he calls us *girls*
at practice calls us
at home

& so we dive, water safe
water swilling
swan necks tight
asses

*

legs everywhere girls pull
themselves on deck stroke
surface skintight
Speedo Illusion Splice

I'll show you a girl who has shaved
coach tells me before my race

I want him
to say *ease up*

*in the first one-hundred
let the girl in Lane Four take it out
power off the wall*

but he slinks a hand
over my shoulder
 (and I don't shrug him away
 maybe this is what I need
 to make the relay team)
murmurs *if the water drips
down in one line, she's still hairy
but if there are beads
she's shaved*
he says *look at that one, Jackie*
 my name a singling out
 my name a sin —
points at a girl's quivering drops

we look her up and down
lines of her frame
might be mine

I want her to explode
off the blocks smooth
new legs like fish slime
at first then like being
swallowed home

*

we are steely
quads diamond cut
deltoids

fingers tremble clutching
blocks silence before
the beep thrust
all of us

we push away
what we move through

none of what I don't understand
muscle as anything but
a way to escape coach smirking
we'll go with the hi-cuts

race day my suit tight clinging
hip bone marking me fit
a girl how to tell the difference
between glint of eyes lingering
too long and a mirage

my body is easy to know
submerged

each breath
my mom cheers *Jack*
each breath I take
I am safe a boy
Jack, Jack, Jack

*

I need the trainer
one room away
but coach says *lie down*
on the diving board

& I do

because in Texas
a coach is a man
is a god is a friend
of the superintendent
is a rule to follow
when you are a girl
& thirteen

because he says *I'll take care of you*

because no years have passed
yet no mom saying, angry
did he sit with his crotch on your
backside no god ruling a body
more than bone and skin

because how to say *no* to what isn't
a threat his hands rub skin
ices me down before

it is only a massage only
a coach an athlete
a girl maybe is it okay
I don't know how to say

he tugs thin strap
of elastic from my back
greedy fingers dig at tender
of my shoulder
nothing more