



# 20190715\_theslowdown\_20190715\_128

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

pool, mother, blue, swim, growing, summer, black, lifeguard, bright blue skies, water, swimming, sputter, elaine, crystal clear waters, poem, poet, treaded, lane, bellied, girl

00:06

I'm Tracy k Smith, and this is the slow down.

00:22

The summer when I was seven, I spent long afternoons at the local pool. I moved back and forth between the baby pool and the big block long pool with its lanes and diving boards, and it's throng of teenagers. Everything smelled of coconut suntan oil, a smell I still associate with those bright blue skies and hot happy days. For a few weeks that same summer, I went back to the pool in the evenings. There I sat dangling my legs in an unused lane. While my mother took swimming lessons. She wore a black one piece bathing suit and a swimming cap adorned with white rubber flowers. She learned the crawl the backstroke, she treaded water, she floated with increasing comfort and ease, just as I had done the summer before. I always just figured my mother had been too busy to swim growing up, that she'd been a farm girl with work to do in the summers. I imagined she was playing catch up in those evening swim classes, finally getting around to something she'd never had time for before. It wasn't until I encountered today's poem, variations in blue by Lauren K. Elaine, that I realized my mother was writing a wrong. The first time I read Elaine's poem, I cried. It opens with a brief dialogue between the poet who grew up swimming crystal clear waters in Trinidad and Tobago, and black Appalachian poet Frank x Walker. They're quick back and forth, highlights one of the effects of Jim Crow laws in this country, which is that generations of blacks growing up in segregated communities never learned to swim. Growing up, black kids like my mother and her siblings cooled off and had fun splashing in creeks and ponds and fishing holes. But the safety and comfort of clean clear water and the watchful eye of lifeguards, none of that was available to them. Variations in blue by Lauren K. Elaine, for Frank x Walker. f x W. I don't know how to swim. me. What? f x w W. There were no pools for black folk when I was coming up. In sleeps 3d Theater home, a green island surrounded by the blue of

ocean. Zoom to the heart. See the kuva swimming pool filled with us. black children shrieking our joy in a haze of sun. Our lifeguard Rodney his skin flawless and gleaming black as fresh oil has struck along the pools edge is swoonworthy smile, Daddy, a beach ball bellied post Sidon droplets diamond in his Afro. My brother hollering as he jumps into his bright blue fear his return to air gasping and triumphant and there the girl I was dumpling thick and sun brown stripped down to the red two piece suit my mother had made by hand, a float in the blue bed of water. The blue sky beaming above. When I wake up, I'm in America, or Dorothy Dandridge once emptied a pool with her Pinkie and in Texas, a black girl's body draped in its hopeful tassel bikini struck Earth instead of water. A policeman's blue clad knees, pinning her back, her Indigo whale, a siren. I want this to be a dream. But I am awake. And in this place where the only blue named home is a song and we are meant to sink to sputter to drown. The slow down is a production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Poetry Foundation.