Finding Nell Jackson

Kelly Belanger, Virginia Tech

I am from separate and unequal
From graduate school in Iowa
Paid for by Alabama
To keep white schools pure.

I am from education and tradition
A master of biomechanics
And doctor of physical education
Daughter of a doctor of philosophy

From Tuskegee and Booker T.
Calm, self-possessed, patient and polite –
Traits of the highly accomplished –
Point the way Up From Slavery.

I am from success through work:
Overload the muscles.
Become even stronger.
Strategize, condition.

I am from the realm of one’s own ability,
Not the realm of comparison.
I recommend The Equalizer:
A Formula for an Individual Goal.

I am from the ’48 and ’56, and ’72 Games.
With Mildred McDaniel, Wilma Rudolph, Stella Walsh
I earned the right to stand taller,
But too much stride only slows down the speed.
I am from staying on the ground, from bootstraps,
Quiet dignity, no excuses. Others rock the boat;
My anger is measured, a strategy to feed
Hungry skeletons emerging finally from closets.
From classrooms without walls and chairs
I was merged, submerged, emerged
Into profits and ledgers and bright lights
Until, all at once, I was gone.
Now almost no one knows my name.

Note from the Author

Kelly Belanger is an Associate Professor of English at Virginia Tech, where she directs the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society and co-directs the Blue Ridge Writing Project. She is the co-author of Second Shift: Teaching Writing to Working Adults and has published articles and book chapters on writing program administration, gender and writing, and professional communication. Her current book project is entitled Invisible Seasons: The Struggle for Equity in Higher Education Athletics.