Spring 2018

Naiad Blood

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

NAIAD BLOOD

submitted by

SARAH C. BECKMANN 2018

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2018

Director: Clare Rossini

Reader: Ciaran Berry

Reader: David Rosen
In memory of my grandmother, Joan. Keeping my promise to write for you.

“Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever.”
–Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

“Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners.”
–William Shakespeare

“And if you were a proper lady, you didn’t row at all.”
–Daniel J. Boyne, *The Red Rose Crew*
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Homage to the Start

It’s like nothing I’ve felt before.
How when pain enters the equation,
when physical strain is imminent,
time warps.

How when pain enters the equation,
thirty seconds become a millennium;
time warps.
One minute an eternity.

Thirty seconds become a millennium,
but the pain won’t last.
One minute an eternity;
something beautiful never lasts.

But the pain won’t last—
*oh*, when you’re at that line!
Something beautiful never lasts;
*oh*, when that flag goes down!

*Oh*, when you’re at that line!
When physical strain is imminent;
*oh*, when that flag goes down—
it’s like nothing I’ve felt before.
Naiad Blood
Feet bare, head back
in this white rocking chair, one hand
holding my black journal,
I sit on the porch overlooking the bay, writing
a poem called, “The Meaning of Things.”
Through the late summer sunlight,
the leaves of a birch tree sway
in the tender air, spreading
an itchy scent, the brown, flakey seeds
falling to the parched lawn.
The wind carries some seeds
across the road and into the swampy inlet
where a snapping turtle,
open-jawed in the silt, awaits them.

I close the journal, bending closer to the light
that fills my nostrils and pores, honey warm.
The squirrel scales the telephone pole.
A swan swims serenely, forlornly
atop those murky waters. An osprey
streaks for his nest, bearing minnows in his talons
for hungry mouths. The seconds pulse.

I think of those I love—
they all sleep here tonight—
and of all the things I left behind
to come to this place. Those things
are in another world. Those things can’t touch me here
where I watch
my nineteen summers fall like falling
flakes, into the maw of an ancient creature
who lies among white feathers and webbed feet,
paddling over my eternal home’s
molten heart.
Peconic Summers

ok yes i’m in love with
jingle shells and jelly fish

but i’m talking about the
see-through ones that aren’t
pink and don’t sting the ones
that drag shadows like dark
freckles in the shallows the ones
that make you shudder when you
touch their gooey ghosts

i’m talking about sea robins
blowfish sand sharks and porgies
skates and horseshoe crabs things
you catch off your grandfather’s
boat before you jump off and
paddle to the beach where mom sits
in a chair we’ve had since the 60s

i’m talking about a road south
of the harbor where we swim
across a channel our annual
migration to the white point
of land that juts out like a chin
into caribbean blue water

i’m talking about a farmhouse
a rope swing with a tractor tire
wooden adirondack chairs and gas
lanterns on tables with sunflowers
sweet corn on the cob and barefoot
children running beneath the stars

i’m talking about hammocks
rocking chairs and chalk drawings
on the driveway a garage full of
bicycles a blue and white house
a porch with a view—it’s all about

laughter floating through an open
window on a summer firefly night
up into the black like
chinese lanterns fading
A Life through Boats, I

To the Mary Ellen, Cape Henlopen, John H., and Susan Anne

Your jaws open and give us entry
to your steel bowels. Our car nestles
between your ribs, tight, sometimes
a real squeeze—but you never fail
to consume us all, and our wheels.

You let out a long,
reverberating honk, and we watch
as, on both sides, land slowly slides away.
Beneath our feet, the deep vibration of your
well-conditioned heart, the new constant.

You pump us into sea,
past Plum Island, into the Gut, around
the Orient Point Lighthouse—Grammy’s
Lighthouse, black, white,
and regal as a coffee pot.

You have carried me back and forth
between two homes since my body
was new, your pulse as familiar
as my mother’s heartbeat, your buoyant rocking
safe as her womb.
Swans

Joan favors them over most birds. 
She hurries outside to the porch 
as two enter the cove 
beyond the front lawn, 
soft figures gliding on glass. She smiles, 
wipes her hands on her white apron, 
then cups them over her bespectacled, 
blue eyes.

“Dick! Get the camera!”

She decorates her house with 
swan tablecloths, swan china, 
a wooden swan sculpture—
everything color-coordinated blue and white: 
white feathers, blue water.

As I stand on that porch, watch that bay, 
I think of black and white, swans 
and ashes, 
though mostly I feel blue. But I know 
Joan likes swimming with the swans. 
And maybe, that one— 
right there—is her, 

neck bowed, dark eyes consuming.
The Voice of Ashes

I’m having trouble reassembling myself.
I mean this quite literally.
Ever since they spread my ashes here,
it’s gotten harder and harder to be the whole I once was.
But I can sense my distant particles floating randomly,
tangled in the weeds at high tide,
sprinkled into the brown silt that covers the bottom of this bay.
I think part of my left pinkie toe may be lying in the stomach
of a swan. It’s the strangest feeling.

After trying to re-collect myself for roughly five years—
Good God! This water is murky as ever!—
I obviously haven’t had much luck. And yet somehow I
enjoy watching them eat lunch on the porch,
burping and laughing. I smile
to see my foolish, charming husband, so lively.
He sits every morning in the same chair,
sometimes glancing at me across the road,
sometimes gazing straight
at my heart.
I can never tell for how long.

As summer wind sprays dappled light,
I see the two girls walk down the deck, hand in hand.
My, how they’ve grown! They’re so beautiful!
The youngest makes sure to look both ways,
before crossing the road. And then I realize—
Is that her? The oldest? She looks like—
How old is she now? Eighteen?
I choke on a wet breath.

They sit on the grassy bank that overlooks my sanctuary,
still holding hands. I listen to their moving lips, yet I am
deaf to the words they speak, as they are deaf to mine. My ears
are no longer trained to the music of the world.
Stroking the younger girl’s metallic hair, the oldest brings
their joined hands to her chest. Her hazel eyes lift, and land
right on me.

I’m frozen. I can’t move, can’t think. I
stare at my two granddaughters, who are remembering me.
Seasons may pass from this moment on, scattering me thinner
and thinner, but of all my mangled memories, this is my favorite.
I am determined to hold on to it, to memorize
the backs of their shining heads as they depart for the house
that has become my eternal mirror,
its painted wood gleaming like white marble.
A Life through Boats, II

To the Dyer Dhows, Optis, 420s, and Rhodes 19s

Hat, sunscreen, bathing suit, life jacket, whistle, and booties: with these, I learned to tie eight knots, square knots. To rig boats, fold and roll sails on the dock. To sky a line—and how
to capsize, slipping into water
on a cold, cloudy day, lying, drenched, on your exposed center board, levering you upright with my weight, terrified.

I was that girl who hugged your mast, eyes closed, crying, fearing the moment when you tipped too far and we all went falling over again—

that girl who stood in your stern, tiller in one hand, mainsheet in the other, tacking, jibing, dancing with the boom, as the wind whipped and split the ends of my hair, long, loose, wild.

As my body grew, I sailed, and knew the power of air.
Manchester-by-the-Sea

An abecedarian poem

Affluenza
by-the-Sea is what they should
call it.
Decadence at its
ethereal
finest. Where
giddy teenagers smoke
hash when they're bored.
Immaculate oceanside mansions and
jubilant old people;
kids from Captain Dusty’s
leaping with cones in their hands towards
Masconomo Park, where at
night in the
open
parking lot,
questionable things happen, stupid shit in the name of
rebellion. Like that idiot doing donuts around the traffic circle at
Singing Beach. Even the cops are looking for something
to do. Don’t party with more than ten people,
unless you wanna get caught. That’s what it’s like here in Manch
Vegas; everything is so
white you can barely see what fester beneath the surface, see that guy
Xander—is he a freshman?—pass a blunt to his buddy in English class.

You wonder if they know none of this is real. What it will take to
zap them awake.
Phantom Pains

In dreams, I touch my hair, chestnut locks, longer than they ever were in reality.
I play with them, pull them up into a ponytail, wag my head and revel in the soft and swaying.

Sensations
I can almost remember, of something that’s no longer there. I wake up forgetting.

I wonder, did Medusa weep when her hair began to hiss? What of Rapunzel and Sif, both with their golden tresses severed?

Some say when a woman cuts her curls, she loses more than her hair.

The Navajo divines a connection between hair and memory; the longer the strands, the longer the past lives.
I must seem absent-minded.

In Chinese tradition, cropped hair means banishment from the family, rejection.
I must be homeless.

Hindu women only scissor their hair when widowed, their womanhood so closely tied to their husbands.
I must be a widow.

In wider belief, short-haired women are not youthful, feminine.
I must not be beautiful.

But then I see Mulan—a flash of silver and straight, black straw floating to the floor. I see her steal her father’s sword, disguised
to fight for China.

I see Joan of Arc in full armor, hair bobbed, warring for France, and, later, in a prison cell, awaiting her sentence, before sainthood.

Four years have passed, and those phantom dreams still pain me—but, more often now, I stride from the dresser door leaving dark tufts on the ground, feeling so light I could almost laugh!

I know why, after her first flight,

Amelia Earhart chopped her hair.
How to Gain Muscle

You sweat,
everyday. You

squat with a bar on your shoulders,
a concrete-filled paint can on each side.

You wake up early
and lie on a bench, press
a bar with two and a half pounds,
five pounds, ten pounds—
fifteen, then twenty on each side—

You trap bar deadlift
more than your body weight—
*one* time, breathe, *two* times—
breathe—

You ignore your screaming hands
as the weight of eight other bodies
crushes the calluses on your skin, as you
push an oar through water, propel
the shell forward—one stroke after
another—

You lift that vessel out of water and
over your head, arms locked,
knees steady—the lone fisherman
on the dock in shock, watching you—

he watches you and your sisters,
you strong, Amazon warriors—

because women are not *supposed* to have muscle;
women are not *supposed* to be strong—

because not everyone can do
what you do,

everyday.
homage to my legs

these legs are long legs.
they need room to
stretch out in.
they can’t cram into
small spaces. these legs
are strong legs;
they’ve never been broken.
these legs are pretty legs—

these legs move boats.

these legs know
the pain of two thousand meters.
they don’t rush. they’re
smoooth up the slide as if the tracks
were coated with butter.
they’re patient. they wait
for the boat to come
to them. and they don’t slam
the front end; they
land with the softness
of a butterfly’s beating wings.

With thanks to Lucille Clifton
A Life through Boats, III

To the Ruffian, Spectacular Bid, Kraft, Unbowed, Alydar, A4+, and Z4+

I came to rowing
lanky, wide-eyed, the skin on my hands
soft. I was a girl raised by the sea, I thought
I knew the water.

I thought I was a woman. But she appeared
only after

I popped my first blister. After the calluses
on my hands turned yellow. After I couldn’t see
my toes past my thighs, learned to lift weights,
boats. To win silver medals under blinding skies.

My bones as strong as the carbon-fibre
that held me.

The woman I became first breathed
on a seat that barely spans the width of my hips,
sliding, unstable, an oar in my hand that seemed more
like a javelin. The rigger on my right side, wing-like,
my blade one feather out of many.

I am a passenger, a single cog in your engine.
But something greater within all of us
feeds you; you ride on those
inner winds, intangible, yet

stronger than any machine.
The Rower’s Dichotomy

The mechanical dragon
\[ \text{crouches on the ground,} \]
waiting for me
\[ \text{to climb on her back—taunting me} \]
to dare.

She’s an Ergometer,
of the Dynamic species, and her name
\[ \text{is Concept 2.} \]

I settle into my saddle, grasp
the metallic reins, and at
the kick of my spurs her wheel
turns with a hiss and roar.

I stare into her
\[ \text{square face, into the mouth} \]
that spits out numbers, into the eyes
\[ \text{that see nothing but glory} \]
in pain.

She’s the only dragon I know
\[ \text{that never flies.} \]

The onyx vessel
\[ \text{sits in slings,} \]
waiting for us
to pick her up—smiling at us
\[ \text{in the sun.} \]

She’s a boat,
a carbon-fiber shell, and her name
\[ \text{is the Unbowed.} \]

We lift her up, carry her
\[ \text{on our shoulders, and at} \]
\[ \text{the call of our coxswain, we} \]
\[ \text{place her in the water.} \]

We admire her
cylindrical curves, the way water
\[ \text{wicks from her sides, and those} \]
\[ \text{sliding seats oiled} \]
\[ \text{with WD-40.} \]
She’s the only boat we know
that can fly.

I sit astride you in my
organic armor, my
body as my only weapon.

The distance is set. A sacrifice
made: as a woman,

I am already bleeding
before the war.

We sit inside you in our
matching uniforms, our
bodies in numbered order.

The distance is buoyed. Our backs
face the finish line: as women,
some of us are bleeding
before the battle.

You
breathe fire into me—I can feel it
blazing through my muscles—scorching
my every tendon—smoldering
slowly up my spine—you’re
hurting me—I’m
hurting me—
hot—
hot—

You
send a thrill through our veins—we can feel it
jumping in our muscles—bouncing
through every bone—beaming
like a light from our spirits—you’re
moving us—we’re
moving us—
bright—
bright—

The distance ends.
I look up,

    now, at your animated face,
    covered in numbers, and

    I see—
    I see—

    black

    We look up,

    now, at the bright blue sky—

    our breathing synchronized—we are
    one body—we are
    one mind—we are

    us.
Bird’s-Eye MFA application portfolio
Professor Berry
12/18/17

Bird’s Eye

—grip it—

Drive

Drive

Drive

Drive

Drive

Run

Release

Release

Release

Release

Release

Run

Run

Run

Run

-run -repeat-
Rowing: A Metaphor

“But this was against all rule; for the oarsmen must put out their eyes, and ram a skewer through their necks; usage pronouncing that they must have no organs but ears, and no limbs but arms, in these critical moments.”

–Herman Melville, Moby-Dick

“Pull, pull, my fine hearts-alive;
pull, my children;
pull, my little ones,"
drawlingly and soothingly sighed Stubb to his crew, some of whom still showed signs of uneasiness...

“So, so; there you are now;
that’s the stroke for a thousand pounds;
that’s the stroke to sweep the stakes!”

I am blind on this seat,
can’t see
where we’re going. Only
someone’s back in front of me;
my feet, my legs,
my receding arms.
In the peripherals,
flashing blades, blue water,
other crews.

But I keep my eyes
in the boat; I don’t dare
look out—
not thinking, my body moves
opposite our velocity.

“Three cheers, men—all hearts alive!
Easy, easy;
don’t be in a hurry—
don’t be in a hurry.
Why don’t you snap your oars,
you rascals?
Bite something,
you dogs!
So, so, so then;
—softly, softly!
That’s it—that’s it!
long and strong.”
I am deafened on this seat, consumed by one voice, by the thumping and thundering beat of our movement. Oarlocks snap like gunshots—my hands sting with recoil, as my body flows like water, like the water I bend, in and out, with my hands. My fingers scoop that weight, and hang; my calluses suck the oar like frog’s pads. No letting go of this rhythm—dying for this rhythm!—hunting them down.

“Pull, will ye? pull, can’t ye? pull, won’t ye?
Why in the name of gudgeons and ginger-cakes don’t ye pull?—pull and break something! pull, and start your eyes out! ...That’s it—that’s it.
Now ye do something; that looks like it, my steel-bits. Start her—start her, my silver-spoons! Start her, marling spikes!”

I’m fighting on this seat, punching every stroke to the finish line—
pushing horizontal through that tunnel, trusting my blade to find the water cleanly—pulling through that tunnel, into the jaws of something unknown that might just kill me—
Race Day Blues

It’s race day, oh, and those shells
are makin’ their way down the course.
Race day, oh—hundreds
goin’ down that buoyed course.
    I’m in that boat, see me there?
Proud as a racehorse.

I move as seconds pass,
like the tick of a metronome.
Seconds pass—and, steady as
a metronome—
    but no, my strokes are numbered;
my strength’s an aging rose.

Oh—they won’t last!
Grace, youth, beautiful power—
they will never last;
    they’re fragile as the wave
shattering on the tip of our bow.
The Amazon Syndrome

In homage to the 2015 Trinity College women’s first varsity eight

“…where women had taken up ‘weightlifting, ergometers, running the steps of the stadiums, and the flattening of the bosom.’”

–The New York Times

Cox. Alkaia, “Mighty One”

Small army general, master of none,
all must heed her biting tongue, she
hunches down, she
curls her top lip,
steers the rocket, spitting fire—
seeing everything.

8. Hippolyte, “Of the Stampeding Horse”

The Queen, she kills without remorse,
her sand hair pinned
behind her white helm.
First to move and last to the finish line—
every stroke steady,
steady down the course.

7. Antiope, “Confronting Moon”

Dark skin shining in the light of noon,
her hulking bulk, her
wild eyes
gleam with ire, amplify
a followed rhythm
from the other side.

6. Clyemne, “Famous Might”

Lean legs, long legs, born to fight,
graceful balance, perfect craft, she
cuts the water—grips and BOOM—slides—
grips and BOOM—she’s
with her leader,
the sister on her side.
5. *Penthesilea*, “Compelling Men to Mourn”

The Queen, took Troy by storm,  
    fought fair Achilles and lost the war, but—  
dark dark dark dark—  
    power power power power—  
engine engine engine engine—long black hair in a high  
    high tail on her proud high head—

4. *Phoebe*, “Bright One”

Skilled spear-woman, beneath the bright sun,  
    blonde, brawny goddess,  
double braids swinging, she  
    throws her weapon, strikes her target,  
pulls out his chest, stares in your eyes—  
    don’t look—don’t look—


Scrappy and slim, she is younger  
    than her sisters, she is freshest  
in this battle—but pure muscle, core of stone,  
    she holds her own,  
holds an oar  
    with mythic giants.

2. *Lykopsis*, “She-Wolf”

Hawk-eyed archer—watch yourself!  
    Flaming red hair, black ink rose  
on her shoulder—slight, but sinewy—  
    thin, though strong—she strings  
her bow, she narrows  
    her eyes, she aims and—

1. *Androdameia*, “Subduer of Men”

Throat-cutter, teeth-grinder—known as Jen,  
    of broad-shoulder build, sticks for legs but  
strength galore—  
    she is insane. She will push her  
body to extremes that  
    even *Penthesilea* would never dream.
1.

You sit beneath the cream cloth canopy. Your mouth
opens, closes, like a fish
drowning in oxygen.

In your hands, paper, the letters
overflowing. This is how you swallow the lifeblood
of language; this is how you read words.

And why, like all great heroes of the ages,
our mother told you long
ago, in a blue
bedroom bordered with jungle leaves, that you were destined
for greatness.

Yes, it’s true: to be great means to be
lacking. You battle with a burden; you wage a constant war,
bearing a heel more vulnerable than Achilles’, for,
as mother caresses your golden hair, she exhales into your ear:
Your weakness hides a strength.

2.

You, his mother, want him home.
But all he wants
is out.

All he wants
is smoke and party. All he wants
is girls. He wants all the things
you once wanted, did at his age.
You hate to admit that you’re a bit
similar.

But you were smart about it, you think. He
is not.

You worried when you found
weed stashed under the porch.
You worried when he was stoned
before a family reunion (his father
blew a gasket). You worried when he ran away, when he almost got arrested, when you got a call from his school, when he broke the rules and hotboxed in a bathroom—

You worry that he won’t make it through college, that his friends are bad influences—that he, one day, may never—

come home—

You worry, you worry, you worry, in the daylight, in the dark.

3.

My brother is nineteen and lovesick with scars on his chin, on his heart. Going after those girls who wear lipstick, my brother is nineteen and lovesick; at night he remembers me, singing of heartbreak—of being slowly torn apart. My brother is nineteen and lovesick with scars on his chin, on his heart.

4.

The English Vernacular is your personal demon, the monster you are fated to conquer each day. It’s a gigantic, unearthly creature, too stubborn to die, too eager to seek linguistic pain from the ones who were born to oppose it.

Yet you are gifted in the art of combat—your name is Zander. Your title is royal, and you are divine. A demigod of this generation, crouching with sword upraised, you stalk the Cyclopes of Dyslexia in his cave.
My Rock

A heart-shaped rock
sits beating on my desk.

The faint compass on its face
glows, pulsates with the light that
fills its transparent chambers.

It kneels before a golden frame
filled with a picture of you.

This rock reminds me
of being naked on my carpet
floor. Of hugging my knees.
Of staring into the sky outside
my window, my mouth
open—but no longer making sound.
Of not knowing the difference
between sweat and tears.

This rock reminds me
of you. Of you stepping
out of a car in a restaurant
parking lot.

Of you holding my hand
on the table in the booth,
leaving something hard
but warm, in my palm.
“When one rows it is not the rowing which moves the ship: rowing is only a magical ceremony by means of which one compels a demon to move the ship.”

–Nietzsche

“Coming up on the last two minutes, in two we sprint—time to go—
that’s one, and—”

This is the Voice you obey on water and on land. The Voice you hear as you sit on the erg. A calm, strong Voice that makes you want to feel calm and strong, but you’re in pain now, you’re—
barely fighting it—you falter—

“Nope, not this time—”
the Voice says, behind you, in your ear. “Get it back now, thaat’s it—”

You don’t want—
You must. You can’t—
You must…you trust

that Voice, you trust
that if you obey this Voice, do the impossible, you will make it out okay. You will make it out alive—
be thankful for the pain—

“Now, now—”

***

You feel the hair on your body rise, as something electric
shoots down your spine, as you slowly, at first, start to bring that number down—“Bringin’ it down now, theeeere you go—” down down down—
Pull it down with you, drag it
beneath the waves of your consciousness
to that place, seldom sought, where
the deepest recess of your power
lies, that blackness
churning with sparks—

You bring yourself there now—
you call upon it      NOW—
it’s all you can see now—flashing—
you hear more Voices—you are not alone—

“THERE IT IS!” they shout—
your number! As you rope in that elusive
monster, another beast stirs
inside you. Now it’s just
you two
at the center of that labyrinth—

    your body, all fire,
    your mind, all focus.

    ***

You see the ceiling.

You’re on the floor.

Are you breathing?
Is it over?

    Did you make it?
    Yes, the Voice says, yes—

Your muscles scream       smile
Ergometer

From the Greek words *ergon* (“work”) and *metron* (“measure”), literally meaning, “work measurer”

A.k.a., an instrument that measures
the power output of human muscles;
the indoor rower;
the antithesis of the boat.

“…a medieval torture device.” —Boyne

Land-bound. Dry.
Metal, straps and chains,
wheezing, rattling, cracking,
a zombie moaning beneath my body.
The monitor, an ugly head,
all grey and black figures—
distance, time, charts, curves.

It sheds truth in digits. But

ergs. Don’t. Float.

They don’t think, love, hate. *Feel.*

On the erg,
my arms are steel chords, my legs,
pistons firing. But I refuse
to be
a machine that rides machines.

My heart, warm, pumps
on the powers of my singular will.
The water inside me
hums, keeps me
going when no river lies beneath me.

I am not so cold.

Because, in the end,
I choose spirit over integers.
I choose
the water.
“It’s a great art, is rowing. It’s the finest art there is... And when you’re rowing well, why it’s nearing perfection. And when you near perfection, you’re touching the Divine.”

–George Yeoman Pocock

We rowers have peculiar rituals. Like running stairs indoors, inhaling stale air and dust. Like sweating in a tank room, all concrete walls and low ceiling, mirrors and machines. Our suffering, artificial.

While we labor in these confines, we pray in wintertime for blue skies, flat water.
For the sun.

We see in our minds that pavement path that slopes, downward, to the river. On one shoulder, our dark craft, we make our morning pilgrimage: salute the waning moon, the dawn.

First light ricochets off water; the fragments shower our foggy faces. It’s the thing that fully wakes us, makes the naiad blood in any girl sing.

On land, we abandon our bodies, discard our separate shells in exchange for a new vessel. The moment the last foot leaves the dock, an unearthly link completes itself.

On water, our souls surrender, affix to that greater whole, that oneness—at the risk of becoming gods ourselves!—we glide through the waves, our togetherness the only thing that anchors us.
Women and Water

Women and water do not mix.
For a female onboard is bad luck at sea;
Blood blooms in those wayward depths.

Men, in ancient myths,
Wrecked ships at sirens’ song, deadly sweet.
Women and water do not mix.

But, bright against Mother Nyx,
The moon, too, tugs our tides, our bodies;
Blood blooms in those wayward depths.

We live this truth, red as bricks,
Crimson as Ophelia’s flooded veins.
Women and water do not mix.

But, at the sight of a woman’s breasts,
Rough waters calm; naked figureheads keep
Blood from blooming in those wayward depths.

Grace O’Malley, at her father’s refusal, axed
Her hair to ride a ship—and became a sea queen.
Ha! Women and water do not mix!

Strong as an oath on the River Styx,
As superstition is, who could really believe
Women and water do not mix, that
Blood blooms in those wayward depths?
Ode to the Coxless Crew

One ocean. Four women. 257 days at sea. 8,579 miles: San Francisco, CA to Cairns, Australia.

Amid the starburst sunsets, squalls, whales, wind and waves—sometimes an absolute silence emerges in the middle of a calm sea.

Space-like.

The water reflects the sky, or perhaps, the sky reflects the water; the horizon line, one fold in a continuous canvas, and the world heavy. Quiet.

Their boat, Doris, a pink freckle in that blue void.

They row in shifts, and sleep, a constant routine, a rigid ritual. Time loses meaning.

***

They see barges, now and then, carrying cargo between continents. An occasional reminder that humankind exists.

***

Storm waves the size of school buses batter Doris, the wind, rain, and current, savage.

The moment they see Honolulu, two dark hills in the mist, they open a bottle of champagne.

After weeks of freeze-dried food, they gorge themselves on juicy burgers and dripping sundaes.

Again, they lose sight of shore.

***
Lizanne is seasick.
In the green tinge of the night vision frame, she leans oversides, heaves, gets back on her seat. Continues to row.

They reach the equator in pitch black, make an offering to Neptune: brandy overboard.

***

Laura lies cramped in the cabin, the radiophone pressed to her ear. The connection dissolves, the voice of a family member lost in static.

She squeezes her eyes shut. Her fingers cover her face.

***

Emma: “I’ve not got anything left to give… If someone told me I never had to row again, I’d be very happy, and that makes me really sad.”

***

Natalia: “When the essence of who you are is questioned, then, where do you go from there?”

***

They wear wreaths of flowers in Samoa, their skin scorched, eyes red and teary. In a hotel room, Lizanne holds up her hands: white with puss, blisters, calluses protruding like horns.

Again, they lose sight of shore.

***

Christmas: posing for the camera in Santa hats and sunglasses.
New Year’s passes in stillness, save
for four women’s voices, counting down,
whooping in the dark of night, in the careless
Pacific—the moon the size of a needle hole,
piercing the thick, shimmering black.

***

A shot of Natalia, naked.

Her tanned back, one long, brown braid,
faces the camera. The curve of her body rests
on the furry-white, sliding seat. Nothing but
nudging waves, dying daylight, clouds afire—
and four oars
moving back and forth.

“The reason that I’m doing this row,” she says,
“is to test the strength of my human spirit.”

***

In pink shirts and bandanas, they paddle
toward the dock in Cairns. Families and friends
cheering, applauding.

The moment comes: holding hands,
they stand together on Doris, count, extend
one bare foot over land.

The dry earth, almost alien.

They’d grown accustomed to
unsteadiness. To losing sight

of shore.
Thanksgiving

I peel potatoes and
polish silver, as Aunt Kathleen
carves the turkey.

Meat cutting, an art.

Her father was a butcher, she says. She grew up
watching him. Her thick, worn fingers
caress the knife, the fork,
as she digs into the carcass.

She sucks the juices off her skin,
licks her lips, while

Uncle Kim stands hunched,
running steel in long, smooth strokes
across stone, the sound

the methodic crescendo of years
grinding years.
Homesick for the River

I remember the river,
the polluted, mucky smell of it.
I remember the sky,
the starburst, sherbert look of it.

I remember the oars,
the heft of the boat in my hands.
I remember the buoys,
the underbellies of bridges.

I remember the sound,
the low, sharp hiss of one voice.
I remember the feeling,
the thump, swing—thump, swing—

I remember flying.

And when the ice hadn’t melted,
    when the wind hadn’t faltered—
    when the rain started—
    when the snow pelted—

I remember the steam from our bodies,
rising like smoke from the seats.

The heat of my heart,
like a boat in its bay, resting

softly, in slings.
The Rocket

Joan Beckmann
July 4th party
West Islip, NY
1968

Your skin looks pale in this picture. Not sickly, but pearly. Evanescent. Almost as delicate as that paper dress, that paper flower.

Your dress has a rocket on it. It’s taking off straight into the air, a finger scraping the sky with one long, sharp nail. Your hair is strawberry against the leaves.

The blossom in your hand has its petals splayed like the feathers of a blue, exotic bird.

You’re smiling, and I see my father in you. I see my legs, my knees in your knees. My arms in your arms. We have different shoulders, different faces, but I know that the fingernail on my left hand, the nail on my ring finger—is the exact shape as yours.

You were a rocket, a real fireball bound for the sky. But when you took off all you left me

was this oval, narrow, faintly pink.
Horizon Bound

You are 60 feet long and
220 pounds.

But I like to keep you on one shoulder.

I like to
keep you above the ground, as high
as my body can manage, because you
are my keeper.

I’m with you when the sun rises,
when the river steams with mist;
we sit in the cold tendrils, the wisps
shot through by the half-open eyelid
of morning.

I’m with you after sunset,
when orange rims the trees
like embers, when the water swirls
like ink,
like oil—
almost as black as you.

And when I put you down to rest
in our house, your weight
never truly leaves
my shoulder.

When I sleep I think of you. I dream
of what we do. I dream of you
holding me and my sisters, as we
push you toward the sky, eight oars pulling
higher, higher into flight as the waves
suck and slip at your hull—try
not to let you
go—

I dream of us dancing together,
together on the water, always

horizon bound.
NOTES

Opening epigraphs to the collection

Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*.

William Shakespeare in *Othello, the Moore of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3.


References within the collection

4 Peconic Summers Peconic is the name of a geographic area that corresponds to the town of Southold in Suffolk County, NY (the location of my grandparents’ house). The community is named after the two Peconic Bays that lie between Long Island’s North and South Forks.

5 A Life through Boats, I This poem specifically references the Cross Sound Ferry, a year-round vehicle, truck, motorcoach, and passenger ferry service that runs from New London, CT to Orient Point, Long Island, NY.

9 A Life through Boats, II In allusion to Manchester Sailing Association (MSA), located at Tucks Point, Manchester-by-the-Sea, MA.

15 A Life through Boats, III In reference to Friends of Trinity Rowing Boathouse (Bliss Boathouse) located on the bank of the Connecticut River in East Hartford, CT.

20 Rowing: A Metaphor Epigraph taken from Chapter 48, “The First Lowering,” in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Italicized prose from this chapter is also referenced throughout the poem.

23 The Amazon Syndrome Epigraph from *The New York Times* quoted in *The Red Rose Crew*, by Boyne. Dedication to Trinity College’s first varsity eight that won a gold medal at the NCAA DIII Women’s Rowing Championships in Sacramento, CA (May 2015).

28 Fire & Focus Epigraph taken from *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, by Friedrich Nietzsche.
30  Ergometer  The quote from Boyne is taken from *The Red Rose Crew*.

31  Duende in Rowing  Epigraph from George Yeoman Pocock quoted in *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, by Daniel James Brown.

33  Ode to the Coxless Crew  This entire poem is based off a documentary film titled, *Losing Sight of Shore*, directed by Sarah Moshman and released on April 23, 2017. Can be found on Netflix.
On the Creation of *Naiad Blood*

My college experience has been dominated by two activities: writing and rowing. I have been tested with a constant stream of writing 2,000 word essays and rowing 2,000 meter races. Writing creatively has been my passion since the age of twelve, but when I learned to row as a freshman on the Connecticut River, an equal, if not more powerful fascination took hold of me. Being a member of Trinity’s women’s crew team has impacted my life in ways I never could have imagined, and the sport has seeped deeply into my poetry. Rowing has become a metaphor for my life.

Earlier inspiration for my poetry stems from a love for my family, and especially for my grandmother, who passed away when I was thirteen. I experienced a dual feeling of loss during this time, as her death coincided with my entrance into womanhood. My identity and this journey are inherently tied to my poetry, which is why the title of this collection is so apt; this manuscript is literally my blood, representing the core of who I am, where I come from, and what I do.

These four years at Trinity have solidified my sense of self. But moments like my “middle school renaissance,” where I read copious amounts of young adult fiction novels, is where intense word consumption helped develop my initial writing skills. A memory from my seventh-grade chorus class also foreshadows another characteristic of mine: one day my teacher played music and asked the class to dance, to track the beat with our movements. I enjoyed this exercise and remember being aware of my teacher’s gaze, which I felt rather heavily. After everyone quieted, the teacher addressed me in front of the class and asked if I was a dancer. When I said no, she gave me a funny look and said that I have a good sense of rhythm. I remember feeling a mingled flush of pride and embarrassment. Little did I know the ways rhythm would play out in my life.
As I learned to row, my coach often put me in stroke seat. The woman in this position sets the rate and rhythm for the rest of the boat; she is usually technically sound and controlled with her body movements. And I am all about control. Thus, I believe my calm, precise, and rhythmic qualities as an athlete translate into my handling of words. However, I’ve realized that my skill in controlling my body and language has also cultivated one of my strongest fears: the fear of losing control. Once in a while, I’d have panic attacks after doing intense workouts during practice. This fear would build inside me to the point where I’d start crying and hyperventilating. I knew what losing control felt like physically, but I wondered what this feeling would look like on the page.

I write mainly free verse poetry—which theoretically doesn’t have a lot of structure to begin with—but, in my head, I construct my poems in particular ways. I like having the prerogative to do with words what I will. According to Phillis Levin, the poet always has control, but he or she must also be aware of the right moments to release that control. What would happen if I completely let go? What would happen if I dove into those unpredictable waters, as my younger self clinging to the mast in “A Life through Boats, II” was so afraid of doing?

I decided to find out by experimenting with formal poetry, a type of writing that I have little to no experience in producing. This collection features a villanelle, triolet, pantoum, abecedarian, and blues poem. Turning to such structured forms with the intent to relinquish control over my poetry may seem oxymoronic, but through these works I found myself truly surrendering power—by following rules that were not my own. I enjoyed this process, no matter how time consuming and difficult it was, to make all the pieces fit together in those specified ways; dabbling with form has allowed my words to surprise me, permitting variations and patterns to reveal interesting new meanings.
I prefer to read books instead of poetry in my spare time. Most of the epigraphs in my poems are taken from books I’ve read that feature rowing. To date, I am not aware of any collections of poetry dedicated to the sport, something I hope to change in the future with my own work. Moreover, despite my reading preferences, I’ve read a lot of published poetry over the past year and a half alone, from poets discussed in Professor Berry’s senior poetry workshop and in Professor Rutherford’s course, “Shaping the World.”

One poet who left a large impact on me is Carl Phillips; I highly identify with his approach to the writing process. In an interview with BOMB Magazine, Phillips extrapolates on the instincts of language, making an interesting analogy: “It’s like dogsledding, the language being the dogs who aren’t so much driven as they are given the direction; the force is entirely their own, though. The poet, of course, being the sled driver.” Certain poems of mine, such as “Duende in Rowing,” literally push out of me, to use Phillips’ comparison; that energy was already in the language, and all I needed to do was guide it onto the page, rein it in and slow it down. Not all my poems arrive completely this way, but when they do, it’s a rather prophetic experience. All in all, I believe every poem I write contains a degree of this urge, as part of the innate power of language.

Phillips touches upon another idea that I am continually working towards as a young writer: branching out from my personal experience to achieve resonance with a larger audience. In the same interview, Phillips ponders the ability of his work to resonate with others: “I think I’m just lucky that my private struggles happen to be, as well, human struggles, so that the poems happen to resonate with other people besides myself. But I’ve never expected that, or sought it.” Maybe that’s what resonance ultimately comes down to: pure luck. However, I’ve also tried to be proactive on this topic by expanding my subject matter. Poems like “Ode to the Coxless
Crew” and “Rowing: A Metaphor” incorporate more worldly content, whether it’s the story of four women who rowed across the Pacific ocean or a widely known piece of literature like Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. My inclusion of myths and strong historical, female figures also aids this endeavor.

Other recent influences on my work include the poets Natalie Diaz, Afaa Michael Weaver, and A.E. Stallings. Diaz specifically inspired the way I wrote the abecedarian poem in this collection (“Manchester-by-the-Sea”); she has a very colloquial tone in her writing, and she writes a lot about her brother, who, like mine, also has some rebellious moments. A recurring theme in Weaver’s poetry relates to the relationship between man and machine—the idea that men are machines in themselves. Weaver constantly navigates the triangle of mind, body, and spirit in his writing. I resonated with these concepts in the way I write about rowing: how I use my body as an athletic machine, and that polarity between the soul and the water versus the body and land. Lastly, I admire Stallings’ incorporation of Greek mythology in her work and the way she sections some of her poems—two elements that I’ve emulated in my writing.

I am especially proud of *Naiad Blood*. This compilation is a real capstone of my collegiate writing career, and, in a sense, my collegiate rowing career. I’ve truly worked during college; I leave Trinity with calluses on my hands, having seen countless sunrises, and with my identity embellished by the words in this manuscript. However, as much as this collection is about me, I think it also labors to redefine the female by breaking certain rules. These poems demonstrate that a woman can remain feminine even if she engages with masculinized realms, even if she gains muscle or cuts off her hair. No matter what she does or how she looks, she is beautiful. These poems embrace both the masculine and feminine; they embrace change, freedom, and power.
With great appreciation, I want to thank my thesis and academic advisor, Professor Rossini. Her constant guidance and amazing feedback have played a tremendous part in the production of this collection. I am so grateful for all the opportunities and support that both Professor Rossini and the other faculty members of the English department have given me over the past four years. I’d also like to thank my parents, without whom my life-changing experience at Trinity, and so much more, would not have been possible.