

GRAHAM Sr., AARON DYLAN., MFA. The Goddess, Columbia (2021)
Directed by Stuart Dischell. 45 pp.

This project represents a historical investigation into the political and cultural origins of America's first and only Goddess, Columbia. The mythical figure was invented by Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington among others and was a consideration during the founding of the country based on the fact that the British Colonies were primarily Judeo Christian in belief and thus only held a single male deity as an image and symbol for the nation. Harkening back to Greece and Rome, whose governing principles the founders drew heavily upon, it was thought there would be social, cultural, and political benefits to the creation of a female deity to serve as an emblem for the nation. Thus, Columbia was created, and the district, which was to serve as the seat of the federal government, was named after her. You can find her statue in front of courthouses and atop state capitol buildings to this day. This is a poetic re-imagining of her story.

THE GODDESS, COLUMBIA

by

Aaron Dylan Graham Sr.

A THESIS

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

2021

DEDICATION

For My Children:

Alexi Katherine, my moon and my stars, my Loodle Miss. As I write this, you are ten whole years old. To quote someone you'll soon read and know well, "Thy life is a miracle." Not just for me, but for everyone you will ever meet.

Nora Skye, my No No Bird. At the tender old age of four you are twice as smart as I am and four times as wise. Keep being you. Keep being particular. Keep being skeptical of men. You are perfect. Keep dreaming of princess birthday parties and not dreaming of cats who will bite you.

Naomi Sage, my Ne Ne. You are three and are the ne ne ne planting of all the good things in my life—in the world. To quote this big, old book you've already begun to read "You are a girl after my own heart." Keep dreaming specifically of cats who will bite you.

Aaron Dylan Jr., Mr. Baby, Thickums, T.J. Chunkerton. You made my life complete before it was complete. You're all of one year old and you've already made me the most proud and happy father on the planet. I'm sorry you were born in a time when the only faces you could see without a mask on were mine and your sisters'. You'll meet humanity someday soon. Hold it with loose fingers.

&

For Marlon, Paquita, and Susan who had my and my children's backs when no one else did.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Aaron Dylan Graham Sr. has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair	<u>Stuart Dischell</u>
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3/19/2021

Date of Acceptance by Committee

2/5/2021

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the faculty of the MFA program for their dedication and patience, especially in these pandemic times and their tireless dedication to my cohort and for the hours of thoughtful and meaningful time they spent with our poetry.

I would like to acknowledge my friends Alysia Harris and Pamela Paek who first cultivated the idea that I could write poetry and perhaps make something of it, without y'all I'd not have written three books of poems, applied to this program, or began this project. This collection is as much yours as it is my own,

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Laura Otis of Emory University, it was in her Neurobiology, Mental Simulation, and Literature course that I was forced to write my first three poems and then at her urging that I use those three poems as an application to the Squaw Valley Community of Poet's Summer Workshop. I did. I was accepted. And, even though I showed up with only those same three poems in hand, by the end of that week, I had ten. It sort of took off from there. Thank you for being there and for truly looking out for your students, Dr. Otis, you are an inspiration.

I would also like to acknowledge The Cambridge Writer's for agreeing to publish "The Goddess Speaks from the Pumping Station at Westbank, Algiers Point, LA" in their forthcoming anthology of resistance poetry

Finally, I would like to thank *A Too Powerful Word* for agreeing to publish "The Alpha and the Amiga," "The Goddess Sees Her Reflection in a Wash Basin," and "The Goddess' Night on the Town". All of which are forthcoming.

PREFACE

This project represents a historical investigation into the political and cultural origins of America's first and only Goddess, Columbia. The mythical figure was invented by Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington among others and was a consideration during the founding of the country based on the fact that the British Colonies were primarily Judeo Christian in belief and thus only held a single male deity as an image and symbol for the nation. Harkening back to Greece and Rome, whose governing principles the funders drew heavily upon, it was thought there would be social, cultural, and political benefits to the creation of a female deity to serve as an emblem for the nation. Thus, Columbia was created, and the district, which was to serve as the seat of the federal government, was named after her. You can find her statue in front of courthouses and atop state capitol buildings to this day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	III
APPROVAL PAGE.....	IV
PREFACE.....	VI
EPIGRAPH.....	1
A GODDESS IS	2
THE GODDESS IS REBORN	3
THE GODDESS RETURNS.....	6
IT WAS	7
THE NEW GOLDEN BOUGH.....	8
THE GODDESS SPEAKS FROM THE PUMPING STATION.....	10
THE GODDESS STALKS THE LAND.....	27
THE GODDESS SINGS	28
THE GODDESS’S NIGHT ON THE TOWN	29
THE GODDESS MEETS THE SAGEBRUSH DRIFTER.....	31
THE GODDESS SEES HER REFLECTION IN A WASH BASIN	33
THE GODDESS PREQUALIFIES FOR A MORTGAGE.....	35
THE GODDESS AT O’HARE AIRPORT	37
THE GODDESS, FROM AFAR.....	39
GODDESS IS CAMOUFLAGED	40
THE ALPHA AND THE AMIGA	42
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	45

EPIGRAPH

*For, when everything has been made so easy, for so many, for so long, the poet has no choice:
The task must be made difficult, for only the difficult inspires the noble-hearted.*

~Soren Kierkegaard

A GODDESS IS

a bargain one can easily afford
to be reborn an antinomian
made for exceptions, not rules
for romances of snuffed-out candles
for sunflower heads lopped off mid-bloom
for window dressings and sweated-in velvet
nothing as wrong if you remain robust

citizens sweating out lives
—their electric bills in default—
have learned disease cannot be
romanced easily—unlike
youth's waning, pale, bosom—

malady never fawns or waxes
a great life, if you don't weaken
for decay, romanticized however
you may, impresses death no more
than other less-sweaty pallor.

THE GODDESS IS REBORN

so she wonders
if it is motherhood
or if it's death

she should try and explain,
 (she knows she should explain)
 two years after they shipped her body back,

she came, in that same way
in the middle of the night
with plastic hoses and tubes

 and IV bags full of red and light
 blue life pumping her back
 across gulf and ocean

she became illegible—
her mottled brown, plasticized skin
gave way abruptly as asphalt—

her being melted
like hardball dark
like the state maintained blacktop

she flowed
over wash boarded ruts
and red gravel dust

pooled
on dirt road turn offs
her run-off coats pickup

beds she dims headlamps
along old county roads
her heart is as strong as

cold cranking diesels
see, it's throbbing,
it's sputtering in predawn-dark

fumes are sunlight,
are a fleshy pucker,
a grainy crush

she is clove-crust,
dust and life preserver,
a storm surge washed ashore.

dead a half century and a half
then seen herself strolling down
sandy beaches, as their mother

she found how holding a little life
in her hand
—each tiny grain of sand—

could become a contact
for a nation
blind with cataracts

for a moment
she thought about the lensing
of joy-dead eyes

she thought about
her people being
able to see.

THE GODDESS RETURNS

descends hills
to the deltas
finds within her those living
and pretending her morning
is their morning
she becomes the topsoil
steady and certain retreat:
eroding, crumbling,
indeterminate
destroys all her offspring
infecting herself,
then devoured she spreads
like a virus:
dissembled
dismembered
and passed
from mouth
to mouth.

IT WAS

the first time the goddess knew
that the beginning was the word
and the word was a spell and
the word, was with the spell and the
word was spelled and then spilt
and then split to be spelled because
it is only one syllable to utter hell

she knew that words

in their uttering, begets spells.

and so, she speaks, before she spells

THE NEW GOLDEN BOUGH

For the community of Algiers Point, Louisiana, the West Bank occupies a status similar to the cave system at Cumae in Mediterranean culture. Both are believed to be physical portals to the afterlife. It is at West Bank, that the souls of rulers, city administrators, community organizers, politicians, and activists return upon their death to be confronted by those individuals they murdered, subjugated, or led the destruction of deliberately, through negligence, or by lack of compassion. This belief can be considered another iteration of a final accounting, perhaps descended from the Greek worship of Minos. This practice was likely adopted, though much later, by Christian and Gnostic sects as evidenced by the parallel nature of the judgments and, that in both, the locations occupy a position prior to the soul's beginning the afterlife, are undeniable. The deceased rulers' judgment at West Bank is not believed to entail their accountability to the people of Algiers Point or the broader New Orleans community. Remember, Aeneas, confronted by the shade of Dido, his wife and queen, whom he abandoned, humiliated, and pushed from the parapet to a fiery death, first, acted as if he couldn't see her. Next, denied he knew who she was. Then produced a litany of excuses based on notions of the political will. At last, he simply trudged off to the Elysian Fields without tendering so much as an apology and forgoing any public recognition of his betrayal, an act through which he endangered the public trust, caused a war leading to the death of generations of his countrymen, the genocide of an entire people, and an unparalleled level of intergenerational poverty.

Similarly, the area of West Bank, particularly that nearest the pumping station erected as a failsafe for New Orleans' levee system after its catastrophic failure, is treated as an Axis Mundi by the local community. This landmark's social and religious function mirrors the Vale of Tears prominent in the Attis and Osiris cults of Phaeacia, Gallipoli, and Macedonia.

~ *Sir James Frazer*, 2020

THE GODDESS SPEAKS FROM THE PUMPING STATION

(WESTBANK—ALGIERS POINT, LA)

Those are not trash

pandas manducating

mashed taters

those are not porcupines

humming twelve-bar

blues, rising on hind

legs, carrying lunchboxes

to Baton Rouge textile mills

those are not blue

jay shrieks or chicks

dying in robbed nests

those are the ghosts

Ambling to the Pumping

Station at Westbank.

Why so sullen, Mr. Senator?

Have you flogged

too few men

with regulatory law,

your ugly mug?

Have you ruined

too few

Geechee women,

your honor?

Dear sir or madame,

We know you,

like us,

would like,

would lust

to show power

over the free-thinkers

the anarchists,

the Bob Dylans

the David

Mammets but

Dear sir or madame,

It has become

difficult

to show

it now!

High Priestess Bater-Ginsberg,

you are tired

of pumping iron—

the black robe,

the yoga pants,

the carbon-free air —

still cold.

What are you thinking,

by the pump house station

among the quiet

suture-mouthed

shamans?

The Army Corps of Engineers

is tireless steel

is picks tapping

new veins.

—cypress groves, all moss covered—

is exhausted

levies and dikes.

—cypress groves now dry—

lift the same gas

lights held

over your grandmothers'

flickering minutes.

—the cypress has died—

Chugga chugga...

Clink Clang...

a coal-fired engine,
a ringing
of chains, still
sounding

Chugga Choo Choo...

Clink Clank...

The iron spikes,
the timber track
laid from San Fran
to Roanoke and here
and there, gangs
in chains
still
talk.

You answer

in bills

and motions

—chains

policies lived

—as chains

do we chew our black bread

rightly or wrongly?

do we chew our white

bread better than you?

your answers come
at night—

white
partisans

mute
librarians

dying
before us

such as we are
redacted

never for us
such as we are

taxed
represented, such

as we are

we are

dying

for others.

Now back in her marshy

delta -groves

The Goddess hears

breathing

alongside her.

She

places a left hand

on a shuddering shoulder—

Langhorne Clemens

hiding

from his afterlife

hiding

from long

ago

from sailing

that little barge

over

where the pumping

station now

stands at Westbank.

His teeth still set

on edge—

by gamblers

by bitter

tobacco.

The Goddess saw

no faith

in the lamps

of his eyes

but that which dies

when cicadas or

woe dip

that Mississippi,

that world,

in dusk.

So, her I

Became

again an I—

chastising him

at the threshold

of sunrise.

She bid him:

dissipate.

Bid him:

light your corncob

pipe—

your twelve

chapters—

remand them

to the custody

of the Delta.

His response:

only his impotent

sprinkling— his ash.

When his smoke
had cleared

The Goddess looked
into the dried

dust
the two-track

distance,
and she didn't see

the south,
that port and ancient

prison / that longing
for liberty for scope

that began in that moment
when Sherman with

a brassy sleeve of chevrons
ornate stitching and filigree

to wipe tears from the cheek
of a slave /

share cropper
then looked to East,

set his jaw
dropped his hand to his side

and said:

Burn it all.

THE GODDESS STALKS THE LAND

weapons in hand
a minaret—a reservoir
of will

carries a fault-line fixing
our position in the
solar system

scribbles on the chest of midnight
cuts the twilight
out of her palms

steals the morning's shoes
and outruns whatever
will come

becomes a cloud, the noon-sun
becomes a ruin, prophets
will despair

sits, silent at the crossroads erasing
scientific equations wiping formulas
from the forehead of time

after each footprint was erased
from the dust the wind grew still
as hush

THE GODDESS SINGS

To the ash

the woodland floor

is barely breath

within it

the wind still beats

twists beneath sheets

becoming rooted

in the soil

scraping cinders

from matchstick trees

arrayed like matchstick crosses

whispering

the crime

of melting

together

THE GODDESS'S NIGHT ON THE TOWN

swings—here
work has fallen
behind scars her mask
is the world
so she is sober

so she dares
to scour the sense
to be bewitched,
to be the ne ne ne
planting of okra
and the sowing of woe
beneath their rows
and she grieves
the heaving of seeds
the mounds of mud
stitched with seams
of laced hair

the banks beat down

latticed with the full moon

THE GODDESS MEETS THE SAGEBRUSH DRIFTER

follows the dark dirt road
between her gapped teeth.
That whole summer
when her father was shot
they called her Palomino
and mama rode her like grief—
then she became grief—
bridled and directionless
burden-of-back
broken-in-middle
like the arches
of a woman working
in heels. She wears the rough
like two-track roads
. wears the sagebrush
and wears its bumps
like a horned toad.

the sagebrush

is a good girl's eyeshadow—

how easily the good smudges.

The touch of him is delicate:

snow on snow.

In the arms of a long-haired drifter,

each wet streak down a cheek,

is a detonator cord and a forest-fire.

This fire is the forest's auburn hair

being pulled out by the root.

Her September sighs smell—

incense laced with gunpowder,

the exit wound's lips' mouth

a final benediction—

a puff of soot.

THE GODDESS SEES HER REFLECTION IN A WASH BASIN

Wormwood made

her moon shine.

The Good Book

lied. The last days

came first, came

in the fertile years,

each one a breast.

Her lips made words

to plant a new nation

full of old county dirt

before the weather

was on her body,

burning like a broad

lawn, her hair like drawn

flames, her mother's screams

once wood, are now dust

and oranges. She notes how
limbs break mid-flow

like a misstep,

like a shifting line, whitening
even the fullest fires.

her arm is, just as night is,

silence. Dark acres
and white clover

are a gesture

towards the curve
of her bended knee.

THE GODDESS PREQUALIFIES FOR A MORTGAGE

The rain rots through
the paneling of
the Goddess's shotgun
house. Outside, her
kudzu grows strangling
arms and bark swells
with beetle young—
yeast in the soil.

After the revival
tents are gone

The railroad
track becomes her
spine, her head
a smokestack full
of final notes
and sulfured
flares drifting
to the swamp

where,with soot

still floating

in the air,

she makes

a roux

of dark night.

THE GODDESS AT O'HARE AIRPORT

A few hours ago, she was waiting
for wind to abate, for crews
to clear the snow. The Goddess,
the faceless crowd of strangers
became a family. Each passenger
reborn a familiar figure.

The tall man in an orange sport coat
who ate a banana every hour.

The old woman with long, white hair
under the cyan and pink hijab—
prayed to Allah in her sleep,
her body curled into the prophet's name.

Next to her, the young couple watching
movie after movie on a single phone—
huddled together, four eyes glued
to a tiny screen.

The businessman pacing
 incessantly talking
 on his Blue Tooth.

She became a hundred pairs of tired eyes

moving back and forth—

tarmac to monitor

tarmac to monitor—

The eternal voice:

The day's departures,

frantic calls,

new gates,

missing passengers,

crisp numbers,

mangled names—

The Goddess listens.

THE GODDESS, FROM AFAR

The geese look like chocolate. The sand
taught me how to lie. The waves at 6 and 6
smudge the sand's make up.
Bent like a dogwood cross laid on a blade of grass
-brother killing brother- without
brilliance. When faced with the
past some men couldn't see, others
turned over the dark in their hands
until it was a shape. I have the autograph
of the soil in the vegetables I cut and cook and eat
the stewing pot crammed with potatoes that blather yellow
-the name of Abel there like a boiled stain.-
This doesn't happen, that our father comes home and
holds us as if we belong one in each arm. The exile of
myself from you is a passion
I hung up in writing. Do not deliver me to
another blank page; I miss the glow of
your tangerine hair.

GODDESS IS CAMOUFLAGED

legs crossed,
with the bruises
of being proud sitting
she became the peeling olive
linoleum flooring for that year—

the sifting of dead yellow edges
scanning journals and newspapers
articles retreating to the past
like ghosts in bank-office windows

all half-sheet and nicotine stain
hollow eyes dancing—never growing tattered
tree-branch topographies twist
together—vague silhouettes of the deceased
remaining after the headlines,

after the marches—the political utility
after the movement dissipates, memory
even the warring mausoleum. Her mind
The one-sided scrap-paper of God.

THE ALPHA AND THE AMIGA

~For Greg Geis

Aristotle says that
Prime Matter is
whatever already was
and was always already.

Which, I'll remind you
was the nearest thing

Ancient Greeks
had to grits.

It conformed
to whatever
they ladled over it.

I hear it's still served
in New Orleans
with a cream gravy,
never that tomatoey shit.

Here, in the middle path,
we always
bitch at weathermen
like false Elijahs.

We, on our wu-zeey wie
and our *non-ado* acts
the drinking
the driving
to Houston.

Lay waste
the sagebrush and the sand.

Hump the dunes
in Chinese APCs
which break down
and which
as the Buddha says,
mechanics both fix
and do not fix.

Lord, make of our lives
an ordered accounting
an unbalanced checkbook
people and gratitude
what is left to us
after us.
Not supplication.
Merely being tidy.

We stayed in bed
until dawn
the sun
maintaining
its orbit as long
as could be expected.
Ultimately confirming:
the status
is still quo.

There remains
providence in each
fallen sparrow.

*Even if it ain't
fittin'a come now,
it still fittin'a come.*

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aaron Graham Sr. hails from Glenrock, Wyoming, population 1159, which boasts seven bars, six churches, a single 4-way stop sign, and no stoplights. He has been a practicing poet for many years, and is an alumnus of Squaw Valley Writers Workshop, where he worked with Robert Hass and C. D. Wright, and served as the editor-in-chief for the Squaw Valley Review. He has also attended The Ashbury Home School in Hudson, New York, been selected as the Cecilia Baker Veterans' Memorial Fellow for the Seaside Writers and received a full bursary and fellowship to the Cambridge Writing Retreat in New Orleans. He has been awarded residencies at the Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art in North Adams, Massachusetts and in Truchas, New Mexico. He has also served as the director for the writing and ESL tutoring center at Emory's Neil Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing. His chapbooks, "The Hurry up and the Wait," and "Skyping from a Combat Zone," were shortlisted for the Tupelo Press Sunken Garden National Prize and his full-length manuscript, "Blood Stripes" was shortlisted for The Berkshire Prize before being selected for publication with Sundress Publications.

His poems have appeared in numerous publications including: The Taos International Journal of Poetry and Art, Grist, Zero-Dark Thirty, SAND, Berlin's Preeminent Journal of the Arts and Letters, The Seven Hill Review, Cleaver Magazine, Scalawag, Alternating Curreant, Heartwood Review, East Bay Review and others. The title piece of his 2019 collection, "Blood Stripes," won the 2017 Luminaire Award for best poem; "Olfaction" won the 2016 Penumbra Poetry Prize; and "PTSD Poem #12" won a Readers' Choice Award, was a national finalist for Best New Poems of 2016, and was nominated for "Best of the Net."

Aaron has served as the poetry editor for Muse /A, assistant poetry editor at The Tishman Review, and also founded a weekly poetry workshop on writing the military experience for Veterans and their families at the Atlanta VAMC.