



Srishti Krishnamoorthy-Cavell, 'On *Bernache Nonnette*.' (2021)  
13(1): 11 *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.6470>



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## On *Bernache Nonnette*

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Anna Mendelssohn's pamphlet *Bernache Nonnette* (Equipage, 1995), is a sensuous, quietly powerful and darkly ironic document of sexuality, labour, violence and fruition. Published under the name of Grace Lake, it sets up themes that work themselves into many other poems in the collection, often speaking to them across textual lines in a complex and destabilising cross-talk. 'Bernache' occupies half-spaces in memory, bringing together both a suddenness of beginning and a plural diffusion of endings. In a way then, the poem does not end where it appears to. As a lyrical instance, it ensconces every other poem in the pamphlet while also retaining a transmutative openness to a struggle for reference.

Central to this work is the figure of the bernache nonnette itself – the barnacle goose. Andrew Duncan examines this metaphor in some detail in his review 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths'<sup>1</sup>:

Bernache is a barnacle goose, so called because its young were supposed to grow out of barnacles which then became eels (in a variant, the barnacles grew on trees). Nonnette is also a kind of goose – actually, the same kind of goose – called 'little nun' because its nests were nowhere to be found in northwest Europe, being safe in Greenland, and consequently its sex life was a mystery to Europeans. Tales about gooseberry bushes probably have the same folk-myth source. The theme is sexuality, coming into season, bearing, breeding, dreaming about the child's growth and birth, but only by periphrasis, substitution, fantasy, and camouflage....

It was the unfindableness of barnacle goose nests which led to the saw about a wild goose chase, and indirection, elusiveness, looping around, wild flights, resolutions withdrawn by subterfuge at the last minute, are structural rules in this book. The mystery nesting sites full of fluffy barnacle goslings are a figure both of some Mother Goose fairytale land and of a terrain of poetic fantasy, perhaps the society where we want to live.... Fairy tales about female sexuality and reproduction, a kind of Mother Goose Gorgon; on waters where the wild tales spawn. Human sex life is a mystery too.

It is these networks of criss-crossing pathways that become particularly relevant in the way the overarching imaginary of stasis and movement is structured within the entire pamphlet. While I agree with Duncan as to the almost desultory and hypnotic nature of chase without terminus we find in the poem, where I would locate the pivot of the metaphor of the goose is in the shape of the flight routes it takes. Invisibility is a concern, no doubt, as is the mythopoesis of displacement that lies at the heart of it, but what Lake achieves most incisively through this is a critical commentary on rupture, violence and difference.

Birds prefigure in the poem in several overdetermined instances, existing in tenuous relationships to the geographies (pastoral, urban, linguistic) they appear to inhabit. The title indicates what we might expect in terms of disruption and invisibility, perhaps a mystical questioning of origins. What it does not prepare us for is the way in which the *expectation* of unseeability, of a coy skipping around of sexuality, of an organic meditation on fertility and death comes to be interrupted within the body of the poem. There isn't a wild goose chase that can be mapped unproblematically across the 'narrative' arc of the collection – the flight paths don't merely loop into one another. The poems derive their power from those moments where you expect a trajectory and meet an absence, where migratory patterns do not just disappoint but destabilise.

Notice the brusque consonance in the metastasis of the bird from the almost unobtrusive 'it's cooked bernache nonnette' in the second poem of the pamphlet –

Trail them on a barnacle, item for carpets with holes to collapse into  
 Ultra violet newstrack item new york black / blue, tasteless words  
 Testing another female's response mechanisms, it's cooked bernache nonnette<sup>2</sup>

– to the suddenly frightening 'skin the texture of plucked duck' in the third poem, '& envisaging ruptures':

[...] in a juicy change from learning to advertise the ways of poetry  
 for night to be burnt in those one women bands of centenarian pigtail bouncers.  
 the ones with faces like hard boiled eggs and skin the texture of plucked duck.

Across two pages we have a transition from an image of comforting domesticity to one of brutality. We are given a glimpse of a blood narrative that skims beneath the surface of our disavowal of conscious engagement with the material resistance of the body to violence. This is where the goose becomes more than a metaphor within the poems, dismantling the mechanics of linguistic intimacy that come from the perfect substitution of one term for the other without remainder. Instead, the poem is the goose is the poem – a metonymic association that perpetually elides commensurability along a chain of signifiers. The linguistic excess bears witness to a troubling distance, a periphrastic appeal to the membranous limits of the poem, allowing as well as denying exchange, association, separation, discombobulation. The sinuous text is the nonnette itself, evoked in a fractured absence and interrupted presence.

The titular poem begins with a point before knowledge, and in doing so, before the language to cast the retrospective knowledge in. It opens:

Before too much was known could he have been a trucker this was not known  
 Wooden individuality, individuality could not bear the one off chance  
 A quick word reflection, self-indicative, & chose philosophic witness instead  
 Of enforced lesbianism, favours that were dragged out of one for  
 Replacement capital, hostile women & wondering whether ever one there  
 Would be not oozing succumb or plumb objects that shot out from  
 A line of prose, or devotional setting forward moves, flinging names  
 With body weight, paletting clay over skin to feminize its name

There is a sense of occluded recognition, a half-gesture that offers an unstable vantage point from which to approach what is to come. In a way then the question of whether 'he' was a trucker remains obsolete – the line closes in on itself, burying the positive signal indicated between a claim to partial knowledge and absolute denial. One needs to probe one's way through the skin of the written, lodge perhaps inconveniently between the call and the response, waiting for the message to be recognised. The absence of punctuation is particularly interesting. Missing the commas that would have normally indicated a nod towards pausing, indeed separating, leaves the signscape much more open to a freer exploration of the artifices it hosts. There is a slow dissipation of fiction into a liminal zone of 'truth', an oblique glance at how stories are spun, narratives pieced together from gossip, memory and conjecture, and history written through an obfuscated lens.

The very urban, almost contemporary image of the trucker seems to generate the framework within which we might understand the myth of the nonnette. This is a figure that performs a compressed mirroring of the vagrant mode the goose itself occupies, but transposed on a radically oppositional geography. The trucker too moves, but across a harsher, greyer landscape, veering between the networks of factory-line production, commercial distribution, global consumption and consumerism that the nonnette remains mystically removed from. With the bird, there is a bedrock of absence, invisibility, almost the forbidden allure of the desire for carnal knowledge. The fabric of storytelling that seeks to construct a fantasy that is endlessly generative and bristling with intimacy allows a gentle uncovering and erotic exploration of the unknowable nonnette. With the trucker, the nomadic life he leads becomes his fate. He remains a cog within intricate capitalist machinery, connecting points across the state, transporting goods, *becoming* labour. Ultimately, his travels remain unsung and indeed, unknown. His migrations are pushed against the storyline that propels a vast and complex system of consumerism, his transit is unaccounted for because he matters less than the objects he ferries. The product is the story, and the relay of the trucker

is, paradoxically, both fundamental to this operation and, ultimately, of no narrative consequence. The trucker, much like the nonnette, is always outside language – he is always already ‘not known’. But unlike the bird, language does not *seek* him.

What then might the substitution of two dichotomously realised entities signify? How does Lake work through not just the contradictory approaches to mythologising that the trucker and the nonnette are subjected to, but also the exceptional structure of sexual difference within which they are both located? She moves from an unambiguously masculine trucker (*‘he could have been’*) through a series of masturbatory self-references (*‘Wooden individuality, individuality could not bear the one off chance | A quick word reflection, self-indicative, & chose philosophic witness instead’*) to the excessively feminised, abjected category of ‘lesbianismus’.<sup>3</sup> This is where Lake recovers a poetics of the anti-pastoral. She positions the trucker in negative definition to the nonnette – they occupy contradictory geographies, textualisations and gender paradigms. But in doing so, the trucker forms the final, *productive* moment from which we are to understand the critique of the ‘natural’ metaphor that the nonnette appears to be. Lake’s work is abrasive in its dismantling of anticipated pastoral interpretations that the title of her pamphlet might evoke. It is ecological in gesture but such that it draws from a web of fractured political narratives.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Andrew Duncan, 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths: *Bernache Nonnette*, by Grace Lake', *Angel Exhaust*, 15 (Autumn 1997) <<http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordcdf7-2.html?id=13920>> [Last accessed 23 August 2021].
- <sup>2</sup> Grace Lake, *Bernache Nonnette* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> The shift from 'trucker' to 'lesbianismus' covers multiple modes of change – masculine to feminine, singular to plural, the outer/mobile/public to inner/confined/private. An understanding of female sexuality within an idiom of difference is available in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985) by Luce Irigaray. I read through her notion of diffuse plurality as the defining principle of femininity and gesture towards the ethical implications of this question. 'Lesbianismus' is an interesting entry point into both Irigaray's characterisation of the feminine as radically outside the masculine/(patriarchal) and resistant to its linearity and singularity. Lake's queer poetics pushes this politics to include a critical interiority and abjection by heteronormativity.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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