**Immeasurable as One: Vahni Capildeo's Prose Poetics**

**Abstract:** The work of the Trinidadian British writer Vahni Capildeo has repeatedly employed prose as a poetic form. Noel-Tod reads two of Capildeo's major prose sequences – 'The Monster Scrapbook' (2003) and 'Person Animal Figure' (2005) – in the light of her own critical positions, including her resistance to the expectation that a Caribbean writer living in Britain must be a postcolonial 'documentary witness'. For Capildeo, prose poetry in the experimental tradition of Baudelaire represents a formal and linguistic continuum through which to explore the continuum of experience: the 'indivisible' nature of verse and prose are 'changes of modality' in one text, and the multiplicity of identities in her prose poetry present a model of lyric selfhood that expands the definition of both the 'human' and the 'poetic'.

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Vahni Capildeo's oeuvre is fascinated by the double nature of prose poetry and the nameless third thing that it makes. The result is five collections in which prose and verse are interwoven: *No Traveller Returns* (2003), *Undraining Sea* (2009), *Dark and Unaccustomed Words* (2011), *Utter* (2013), *Measures of Expatriation* (2016). 'In my own writing,' she has said, 'I try to create changes of modality in one book, not make collections of "prose poems" and "poem poems"'.[1] 'Dog or Wolf' (2013), an uncollected lyric which responds to an Iron Age canine figurine in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, offers a poetic version of this position. The poem begins by citing the hesitation of the curatorial note in the display case ('Dog or wolf') and then proposing, in the next line, a literary equivalent: 'Verse, or prose'. Its conclusion, partly written in lineated prose and partly in verse, queries the neat separation of these taxonomic pairs:

> Mistress / I set up a gentle howling / tomb or toy / and now I am about / wyrd or ward / now I am wholly towards / play or prey / ave, vale / which is it to be, Huntress?
>
> I hear with ears that point upwards.
> Eagerness valleys my backbone.
> Satisfaction curls over my tail.
> Good lupo; optimum dog.[2]

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[1] Vahni Capildeo, 'Poetry Into Prose: In One Binding', *Lighthouse* 12 (Spring 2016): 72.
[2] Vahni Capildeo, 'Dog or Wolf', *Cambridge Literary Review* 7 (2013): 59.

The domestic dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*) still contains much of the wolf (*Canis lupus*). A pet dog may be 'gentle', a 'toy', a 'ward', a creature of 'play' and affectionate greeting ('ave', Latin: hail) to a 'Mistress'. But if the homely mistress becomes the 'moonrules Mistress' invoked earlier in the poem – that is, Diana the 'Huntress', Roman goddess of the moon – then the creature who speaks the poem aligns with a darker, wilder set of words: 'howling', 'tomb', 'wyrd' (Old English: fate), 'prey', 'vale' (Latin: farewell). The macaronic final line translates the domesticated English phrase 'good dog' into the sonorous Latin of 'optimum lupo' ('best wolf'). Verse and prose, by implication, are similarly entangled as formal denominations for the same restless creature known as 'poetry'.

Beginning with the Baudelairean framing of her major early sequence, 'The Monster Scrapbook' (2003), Capildeo has been interested in the poetics of prose as a way of formally dramatising the multiplicity of identity while resisting a limited lyricism of the personal. In her next major work, 'Person Animal Figure' (2005), the human-animal-monster/prose-verse-poetry triad of 'monsterhood' was refigured with a new satirical emphasis on the politics of gender and race, reflecting her own experience as a Trinidadian woman living in Britain. Over a decade later, the prose title sequence of *Measures of Expatriation* (2016), Capildeo's most directly autobiographical book to date, makes explicit her recurring use of domestic space as an analogy for how prosimetric form both contains and liberates the hybridity of the poetic imagination. In the same year, Capildeo published 'Poetry into Prose: In One Binding', a short essay concerning prose and verse as 'changes of modality' which draws on her knowledge of Old Norse poetics and its use of the metaphor of bondage. As in 'Dog and Wolf', the essay begins by complicating binary categories and foregrounding the question of translation:

> Old Norse distinguishes between language that conforms to no poetic shape and language in poetic form by using technical terms that are also a construction metaphor: *bundið mál*, bound language or speech, versus *óbundið mál* (but how roughly is unbound speech or language translatable as 'prose'?).

Readers familiar with the poetic concept of 'fixed form' will grasp the idea that verse is 'bound language' readily enough. But 'unfixed form' would be a strange antonym to apply to prose or free verse. 'Bound' and 'unbound', like 'dog' and 'wolf', are terms that exist in a specific cultural dichotomy that can't be easily unpicked on other terms. As Capildeo goes on to show, in the alliterative tales of

the Poetic Edda, the idea of binding-as-form becomes a metaphor for power relations within the narrative: 'text and body, binding and unbinding, […] poetry and prose, partake intensely of each other's being'. Thus, it is the fate of 'the lovelorn, bearlike smith-figure Völundr' to be bound hand and foot and have his ankle sinews cut by his enemies: a brutality that is at once a binding and an unbinding and which, in its 'interpretation of what he can and should be […] is as if he has been made prose'. 'Prose' here denotes the opposite of the poetic: Völundr's heroic identity as a smith depends on his powers of *poiesis* (from the Ancient Greek, meaning 'to make'), but now he is himself reduced to shapeless 'matter'; in the hands of his enemies, he is a sinewless text, lacking the power to become poetic.[3]

The idea that 'text and body… partake intensely of each other's being' is a recurring idea in Capildeo's dialectical thinking about identity. Speaking on BBC radio, she observed:

> When I was growing up I had the idea that the poet could be a channel for all languages, for any sort of linguistic phenomenon that any literary work encountered, and then when I came to England I found that marketing and identity politics were combining to crush, like in the *Star Wars* trash compactor, the body, the voice, the voice on the page, the biography, the history […] You had to choose, you had to be a sort of documentary witness wheeled around and exposing your wounds in the market place.[4]

The '*Star Wars* trash compactor' refers to a scene in George Lucas's 1977 science-fiction film where the four heroes – Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Han Solo and Chewbacca – find themselves caught between the closing walls of a waste disposal system. The horror of the scene, which will be familiar to many children of Capildeo's generation (she was born in 1973), is that it threatens to obliterate not just one person but a whole group. As a critical analogy, therefore, the *Star Wars* trash compactor not only illustrates the idea that a young writer may feel 'crushed' by external forces, but asserts – with Roland Barthes – that 'the voice, the voice on the page, the body, the history' are not simply to be squeezed into a ball known as the Author.[5]

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[3] Capildeo, 'Poetry Into Prose: In One Binding', 69.
[4] Vahni Capildeo, 'Language and Reinvention', *Start the Week*, BBC Radio 4, February 1, 2016.
[5] See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author': 'the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins' (*Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142).

Coming to England from Trinidad in 1991, Capildeo began to publish poems while she was a student at Oxford University, signing herself 'S.V.P. Capildeo'. One motivation for publishing under one's initials might be to conceal gender, as well as to align oneself with the modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and others. The 'marketing and identity politics' that she seems to have found particularly inhibiting at this time, however, were those of race. The 1990s was a period that saw literary culture in England take an increasing interest in the publication of 'black writing', some of which was promoted by anthologies commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the first wave of large-scale immigration from the West Indies with the arrival of the *Windrush* in 1948.[6] Such projects, worthy in intention, inevitably risk simplifying the oeuvres they represent by conflating historical interest with literary interest, identity with voice. The Caribbean writer, in Capildeo's words, becomes 'a sort of documentary witness' – an image which, with a violent twist ('exposing your wounds in the market place'), she elaborates to suggest that the marketing of ethnic minority writing in Britain remains haunted by the history of the slave-owning economics of empire.[7]

Despite such corrective efforts, very few black poets were visible in Britain at the turn of the twenty-first century, while a black prose poet was almost unheard of.[8] Although well established in America by the 1990s, the prose poem was a marginal practice in Britain in the early 2000s, mainly published by the more formally experimental magazines and presses.[9] In this context, Capildeo's decision to devote seventy-one pages of her first collection, *No Traveller Returns* (2003), to 'The Monster Scrapbook', a sequence of poems in both prose and verse, was a bold assertion of her belief that 'the poet could be a channel […] for any sort of linguistic phenomenon'. As she later commented in a 'Synopsis' of *No Traveller Returns*, written for the publisher's website:

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[6] See Bruce King, *The Internationalization of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 224–26.

[7] Capildeo, 'Language and Reinvention'. Derek Walcott makes a similar argument in 'The Muse of History' (1974) when he attacks the conflation of history and identity into an easily consumable poetry of black protest as a modern form of 'minstrel' entertainment (*What the Twilight Says* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 54–55).

[8] Honourable mention should be made, however, of Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon, whose long, lyrical prose text 'Poem in London' was broadcast on the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* programme in 1951. D.S. Marriott, whose oeuvre is contemporary with Capildeo's, has also experimented with prose form: see, for example, *Incognegro* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006).

[9] See Carrie Etter, 'Poetry in the Prose: Getting to Know the Prose Poem', *Poetry Review* 102.2 (Summer 2012): 69–71.

> I realized that this shifting of modes, which initially seemed natural, was not universally obvious. This became a concern within the writing. Identity politics; the lyrical I; were inadequate to a sense of self evolving from others and their words, accessible or arcane.[10]

A prefatory section, written as pastiche epistolary fiction, toys with the questions such a 'shifting' text would raise for readers. 'H.' – whom we later learn is called Henry – presents a 'bundle of writings' by an anonymous relative to a male friend whom he addresses as '*My dear J.*' (later identified as Jeremy). His attitude towards the manuscript is both fascinated and apologetic. '*Do you not share my instinct*,' he asks, '*that some among us are most closely akin to those hybrid and marvellous beasts which haunt legend, manuscript, and folk memory alike?*' Such people, he suggests, are 'Monsters', and the present hybrid manuscript is '*a true image of the MONSTER STATE OF MIND*':

> *It consists of highly disparate parts, as do the minds of Monsters (if one may speak of Monsters' minds). It is a feature of the Monster mind that the most abrupt transitions and the unlikeliest effusions are believed by the Monster to connect. Excessive acquaintance with Monsters or the Monster way will lead any reader, except the most robust, to believe in and pursue this Monstrosity of connections. This is why I would suggest the title OBSESSIVE TALK for the finished collection which (excuse the impertinence!) you, my dear J., will have edited. In the meantime, I have left the original compiler's title, THE MONSTER SCRAPBOOK, to stand. It is my belief that even the apparent stretches of prose are to be read as poetry. Monsters want logic, therefore everything they speak is a kind of poem. Your fine mind will assemble in its entirety the continuous poem which is the MONSTER SCRAPBOOK in its ideal state. It requires only your reading – the POEM will stand complete.*[11]

The reader is left unsure, however, as to the precise relationship between the preface and what follows. Does the fact that 'The Monster Scrapbook' appears with its 'original compiler's title' mean that we are reading the manuscript in Henry's possession? His version, though, was also not the original: we are told that '*some later hand has annotated these writings, and done a cut and paste job on them. It is difficult to say how much has been discarded.*' So if we are not reading J's edited version, or the redacted version that has come into Henry's hands, is this the Monster Scrapbook *ur*-text? Or is it the expanded version of the text that Henry fears a female editor would produce: '*for on the topic of Monsters females have little sense, and would doubtless have preserved the documents in their entirety, indeed adding notes of admiration to the bizarreries there contained*'? (48) (To confuse matters further, the preceding

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[10] Vahni Capildeo, '*No Traveller Returns*: Synopsis', Salt Publishing, accessed September 25 2017, https://www.saltpublishing.com/products/no-traveller-returns-9781876857882

[11] Vahni Capildeo, 'The Monster Scrapbook', *No Traveller Returns* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003), 47–48. Further page references will be given in the text.

sequence in *No Traveller Returns* is called 'Obsessive Talk' – Henry's proposed title for Jeremy's revision – and comprises a single four-part poem titled 'Twist').

The effect is to open up a *mise-en-abyme* around the origin and authorship of the 'Monster' poems. At the same time, an argument is advanced about how to read such a text as 'poetic': it is a work that 'want[s] logic', but the ideal reader will be able to trace a path through its 'Monstrosity of connections' and by sympathetic response convert its scrappiness, which includes 'stretches of prose', into a 'continuous poem' (48). Both the dandyish tone and the paradoxical argument of the preface strongly suggest a burlesque of the single most famous statement on prose poetry in the European tradition: Charles Baudelaire's 1862 letter to his editor Arsène Houssaye, which was published as the posthumous preface to his seminal *Petits Poèmes en Prose* or *Paris Spleen* (1869). This begins:

> My dear friend, I am sending you a modest work of mine, of which nobody can say without injustice that it has neither beginning nor end, as everything in it is both head and tail, one or the other or both at once, each way. […] Take out a vertebra and the two halves of my tortuous fantasy will join together again quite easily. Slice it into any number of chunks and you will find that each has its independent existence. In the hope that a few of these slices will have enough life in them to please and entertain you, I venture to dedicate the whole snake to you.

Like Capildeo's Henry, Baudelaire presents his hybrid work with a diffidence that nevertheless asserts its strange power by characterising it as a kind of 'marvellous beast'. The essential quality of the Monster mind is to make connections between 'highly disparate parts'. Similarly, Baudelaire's plotless collection of prose poems is a fantastical serpent that can be cut into 'any number of chunks' but will always recombine into a 'whole snake'. Both prefaces offer their monsters deferentially to readers whose job is to appreciate them discerningly, and so complete the magical transformation of piecemeal prose into continuous poem (what Baudelaire calls 'the miracle of a poetic prose').[12] Capildeo's Henry takes Baudelaire's conceit of the monstrous text further by presenting the unknown author of the text as a possible monster too, and warning the less 'robust' reader against '*excessive acquaintance*' with '*the Monster way*'. Only Jeremy, and his 'fine mind', can be trusted with the heroic task of drawing the poem out of the prose.

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[12] Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose and La Fanfarlo*, trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil, 1989), 25.

The need to be sensitively appreciated is also the troublesome demand of the Monster species itself. They are, Henry writes, '*people whose eyes hit you with large and sudden appeals – people whose capacity for feeling and action seems sometimes more, sometimes less, than the human* […] *They induce SPECIES FEAR, a kind of wincing of the soul*' (48). To read 'The Monster Scrapbook' is to enter into a condition of uncertainty not only about literary form, but the category of the human itself – a category which, according to 'the Monster's system of reckoning', it transcends: '*Monster* is the opposite of *Animal*, *human* being no more than a shared subset of both' (130). In the sequence's various descriptions of 'Monster consciousness', the Monster, like the prose poem, disturbs dualities by occupying a liminal third position. 'Monster Pastimes', for example, tells us first that Monster 'are great readers' who respond to poems in 'uncritical rhapsodies' of 'purple prose'; then, that Monsters 'get lost in their own poems'; and finally, that Monsters sometimes 'insist on speaking in ellipses' (69). Monsters, it seems, are both readers, writers and a third thing that 'turn[s] away from adequate communication'. An analogy for this tripartite nature is offered by another prose poem in the sequence which does not explicitly concern Monsters, but is part of the bigger 'scrapbook' – a compilation, that is, of things of personal interest to a Monster. 'Seeing Without Looking' describes a sheet of song music in three different ways: as 'a set of printed stanzas', 'a page of printed music', 'a page of lyrics and music'. Each is then compared to a perception of the world that is 'all […] in the mind'. Of the third image, which combines words, melody and music on 'three staves', we are told: 'You would like to rationalize it as a grid. No, the effect is of parallelisms, of things that are separate yet that are, in so far as they become ultimate, irretrievably enmeshed.' (58) The rational grid of definition cannot be applied to 'The Monster Scrapbook'; its dualities can only be read imaginatively, mystically even, by 'seeing without looking' – a riddle that returns in the final sentence of the sequence: 'Monsters have their vision, but they have lost half their sight' (138).

Among the 'things that are separate yet that are […] irretrievably enmeshed' in this sequence is the noun 'monster' itself. The primary definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is:

> a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two
> or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later,
> more generally: any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.

But the *OED* also records an antiphrastic usage – considered obsolete from the eighteenth century, but revived in modern American English – in which 'monster' signifies 'an extraordinarily good or remarkably successful person or thing'. In a poetic context, moreover, it conjures up the hybrid Caliban, Shakespeare's imaginary Caribbean islander in *The Tempest* (a play in which 'monster' occurs thirty-four times). Capildeo's repositioning of 'monster' as the antithesis of 'animal', with 'human' relegated to the hybrid subset, suggests that one lens through which to read the human allegory of 'The Monster Scrapbook' is the postcolonial tradition of Caliban revisionism. In George Lamming's 'A Monster, a Child, a Slave' (1960), for example, Caliban is presented as 'the epitome of a pure and uncalculated naiveté', enslaved by Prospero's taking advantage of his child-like innocence and teaching him language.[13] Similarly, Capildeo tells us: 'To gain the trust of a Monster, all you have to do is speak to it three times a month or so, in human language, with reference to biscuits.' (55) Further such echoes might be elaborated.[14] Capildeo's employment of the lyrical privacy of the prose poem to explore 'monster consciousness', however, also carefully avoids committing itself to unambiguous markers of race and gender. As she comments: 'This poetry collection includes prose. Some pieces […] half-express, half-explain, a certain pressure of situation'.[15] Highly conscious of the pressures that it holds off, 'The Monster Scrapbook' resists being reduced in the trash compactor of personal identity.

Capildeo's next major prose sequence, *Person Animal Figure* (2005) was dedicated to Nikki Santilli, author of the only full-length study of the British prose poem, *Such Rare Citings* (2002).[16] Santilli's book seeks to offer 'concrete evidence for what is still so often considered to be one of the more exotic literary genres'. Her title is a riposte to a polemical 1985 essay, 'The Jubjub Bird', by the poet George Barker:

> The idea of the prose poem exists, certainly; but does the prose poem? […] What is this monster really like? […] Like the Loch Ness monster the prose poem is a creature of whose existence we only have very uncertain evidence.[17]

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[13] George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), 114.

[14] Compare, for example, Capildeo's concluding statement of the distinction between a Monster's imaginative 'vision' and impaired 'sight' (138), with Lamming's claim that Caliban 'is never accorded the power to *see*' but exists in a condition of 'creative blindness' (107, 115).

[15] Capildeo, 'Synopsis'.

[16] The dedication appears in the first chapbook publication of the sequence by Landfill Press in 2005.

[17] Nikki Santilli, *Such Rare Citings: The Prose Poem in English Literature* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), 17.

Barker's mocking use of the cryptozoological metaphor reflects a widespread scepticism about the prose poem as a 'real' form in twentieth-century British literature. It is, moreover, expressed in terms that invoke a cultural suspicion of the exotic: do we believe that such monsters move among us? Having answered this question formally in 'The Monster Scrapbook', in *Person Animal Figure* Capildeo answers it politically. Developing the triadic model of identity (human-animal-monster) sketched by the earlier text, she places a fictionalised version of herself as a British Trinidadian citizen in the 'Person' corner of the triangle, opposite the 'Animal', with the liminal 'Figure' emerging from the resulting dialectic. The sequence is built around anaphoric, third-person descriptions of 'the animal', a restless creature of unknown species, but with many human qualities, including the inhabitation of domestic space. Capildeo's Animal is amorphously metaphorical, and its shape-shifting sees it merge readily with the material fabric of its genteel British life-world:

> The animal who knocks and patters lives in the next room […] It has a fondness for chimney pots. It inquires about fireplaces. When it mourns, it becomes the length of a Victorian flue.[18]

These third-person descriptions are, however, intercut with a first-person monologue which develops in counterpoint to the Animal passages, and which is visually distinguished from them by the use of a bold sans serif font. Whereas the Animal is a mystery that only deepens with every statement made about it, the Person is a mind on immediate display, via a stream-of-consciousness prose that resembles the thoughts of Molly Bloom in the final 'Penelope' chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The Person's monologue is a stylised performance of the anxiety of being between identities. The first paragraph establishes both her familiarity with England and the fact that she is also a foreigner, conscious of a life elsewhere: '**I am the person who buys stamps with the Queen's head on them because this is England […] why a letter because if your family lives far away they are in a different time zone**' (58–59). Like Molly Bloom, Capildeo's Person's run-on style is characterised by the endless curiosity about causal connection of a mind enmeshed in the colonial quotidian (over the course of eight long, unpunctuated sentences, 'Penelope' employs 'because' forty-eight times, and roams imaginatively between Dublin and Gibraltar, where the half-Spanish, half-Irish Molly was born). In the next paragraph,

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[18] Vahni Capildeo, 'Person Animal Figure', *Undraining Sea* (Norwich: Eggbox, 2009). Further page references will be given in the text.

we meet the Person in the supermarket, where she is '**the person who stands up among special offers**' and considers sympathetically '**the girl at the cash desk […] perhaps she hasn't been here long in this country**'. Later in the sequence, defying her own tendency to feel '**guilty about everything**', she launches into a contrarian defence of the consumerist joys of the supermarket:

> **Let me say that the supermarket is something to celebrate […] think of all those hands harvesting in lovely warm countries there's progress for you big spills of sunshine on bare feet and funny hats isn't it wonderful it's like the whole world ends up in here […] always Christmas and never winter that's what it is.** (62–63)

As Marc Augé has observed, the 'non-places' of late capitalism, such as the airport and supermarket, construct the individual consumer as 'innocent' through 'the passive joys of identity-loss'.[19] Here, the Person experiences that loss as a world of overabundance, in which the external reality of place is effaced by the suspension of time under artificial lights ('**always Christmas and never winter**'), and the reality of other people's labour in other countries shrinks to a sprinkling of glib visual synechdoches ('**hands… bare feet and funny hats**') among a mass of other products.

Having atomised the speaker of these passages under supermarket lights, the sequence then moves towards a more profound confrontation of the question of identity and place by drawing the Person back towards the private domestic existence. Previously, this is the domain that had been observed by the more formally observational, third-person prose associated with the Animal. Affirming the need '**to confront my fears at home**', the Person acknowledges that she will '**need a lot of punctuation to do that**'. Freed from formal convention, the flow of stream-of-consciousness prose is – like the anxious mind – potentially boundless in its associations. In the passage that follows, an implicit analogy is developed between the punctuation of sentences and the securing of domestic and psychological space. Itemising aspects of the house that exclude – curtains, blinds, shutters, locks – she reflects that '**the brass letterflap is a point of weakness, but what can one do? It is a period detail**'. The lexical play here on 'point' and 'period' is made explicit in the next sentence, which reverts to the unpointed periods of previous passages as it slips out of the impersonal prose of an estate agent's description ('**this desirable midterrace Edwardian property**') into an imaginative reverie about a former owner ('**Bill**

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[19] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 102–03.

**a broadshouldered factory worker**'). Correcting the slip, she comments: '**The punctuation went there. I have double-bolted, deadlocked, Yale locked, chained, wired, and alarmed the door**' (64).

The sequence's oscillation between the observation of an abstract otherness (the Animal) and the narration of a concrete individuality (the Person) converges here in the private house, with the suggestion that the Person and the Animal may in fact be inhabiting the same domestic, as well as textual, space, and are therefore be understood as the observation of the same individual from different perspectives. The splitting of self is everywhere in the Person's monologue, whose 'fears' are precisely to do with the experience of feeling out-of-place. Her fear that '**I do not have good taste**', for example, is exacerbated by her experience of the racism inherent in the class-structure of British society: '**the people behind the counters in banks and dress shops talk to me as if I were poor but the poor eye me like loose change […] is it wrong to like ribbons well perhaps in London naturally**'. The Person's stammering anxiety is a dramatization of her sense of verbal and cultural inbetweenness that reaches a climax with the recollection of a temporary loss of language itself ('**I could no longer say the green book was green**', 65–67). And it is at this point that another voice enters the sequence, bringing to its alternation of Animal/Person a third poetic being: the abstract 'Figure' of art.

Capildeo's Figure is an entity characterised by the inbetweenness of metaphor – where images are always in transit – as well as the inbetweenness of prose poetry itself. The description of the Figure, which is typographically distinguished by the use of an italic font and a right-justified margin, reads as a text commenting on its emergence as the dialectical shadow of the Animal and the Person:

> *This dark figure moves from peripheral vision when the nest of the body has sprung apart. It jets up from the ground. Turned to face each bodily action, it leads as it beckons, beckons as it mirrors, contracting, decontracting, by a plumage spray of lines.*

Visually resembling both prose and poetry in its 'plumage spray of lines', the Figure stands for both Person and Animal as they become writing itself, in the living moment of being read:

> *This dark figure, in sending itself out, draws after. Constant on all sides, its places itself ahead, proceeding containing the person, that which is drawn at its back. The prickle of nerves betokens the instances of its moves.*

Although Capildeo's 'dark figure', like her 'Monster', passes through the racialized ambit of Caliban-language ('this thing of darkness', as Prospero calls him), it resists being confined to a personal interpretation (that is, one dominated by the Person). Instead, the Figure asserts the indivisibility of the text and its depersonalised art: '*Detachment is this dark figure*,' the section concludes. '*That is immeasurable as one*.' (67)

'Person Animal Figure' does not end at this mystic point of unity, however, but tracks back to narrate the further adventures of the Animal, who is now presented in a state of deepening domestic abjection ('This animal, faithful and grateful, accepts punishment as its due […] It is a lashed and pitted animal') until a final paragraph of sudden release:

> This animal bursts the house open one day and finds another. It cannot do without houses now, but it will find a house that is more wild. […] This animal bounds and rises. […] It is an animal that knows no terms. […] This animal remains beyond those animals forever. (69)

This animal, to borrow the terms of Capildeo's later poem of wildness and domestication, is more wolf than dog – and, it is tempting to say, more prose than verse. But that would be to set terms on an animal that 'knows no terms': no labels, no compromises, no termini. It 'bounds' beyond bounds, to other 'houses' that are 'more wild'.

The metaphorical equation of reimagined domestic space with innovative poetic form is one that Capildeo has continued to develop in her later, more explicitly autobiographical writing. 'Letter Not from Trinidad', for example, a short essay from 2015, describes her childhood experience of Deepavali, when the family garage and part of the house would be transformed into a 'ritual space', with lamps lit and Sanskrit chanted, leading to 'other mixings: of space, and of language'. 'Now that habit of mind has aestheticised itself', she write:

> I see no problem, I take delight, within the space of the page, in crossing from mundane to heightened, elaborated, even opaque codes, registers, allusions. […] To this experience I can trace my instinctive revolt against such terms as 'line break', 'white space' or 'margins of silence'. Without meaning to, I developed a poetics of reverberation and minor noise [and became] a practitioner of a mixity of the alinguistic, the musical, the structured. I write this for an unruly language which is not 'fractured' as with the avant-garde or 'resistant' as with the old-style postcolonial, but may indeed

have a politics, as well as a poetics, belonging to a modernity rooted in ways of life still not considered safe, polite or relevant to admit to the canon.[20]

As with Capildeo's essay 'Poetry into Prose: In One Binding', this assertion of poetics by practice carefully avoids anything as simplistic as a binding distinction between verse and prose. But it may be set beside a key passage from the title sequence of *Measures of Expatriation* (2016), in which 'language' is investigated as the term that both sets bounds to expression and goes beyond them. In 'Going Somewhere, Getting Nowhere', the third part of 'Five Measures of Expatriation', the poet reflects on what the words 'home' and 'Trinidad' came to mean when living in England, concluding 'Language is my home' but with the caveat that 'thought is not bounded by language'. This proposition is illustrated by a brief memory of having 'lost' the words '*wall* and *floor*', so that 'the interiority of the room was in continuous flow', without formal divisions. This 'languageless' experience of being in domestic space then leads to the final declaration, which comes freighted with implication for the politics of critically demarcating certain kinds of imaginative language use 'prose' and others 'poetry': 'Language is my home, I say; not one particular language'.[21]

**JEREMY NOEL-TOD / 5,550 words**

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[20] Vahni Capildeo, 'Letter Not from Trinidad', *PN Review* 221 (January-February 2015): 6.
[21] Vahni Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2016), 100–01.

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