

2016

## Painted Palimpsests: Ancient Texts and Modern Fiction of Roman Transgression

Fraiser Hays Kansteiner  
*Bard College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Kansteiner, Fraiser Hays, "Painted Palimpsests: Ancient Texts and Modern Fiction of Roman Transgression" (2016). *Senior Projects Spring 2016*. Paper 278.  
[http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2016/278](http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2016/278)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2016 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

Painted Palimpsests:  
Ancient Texts and Modern Fiction of Roman  
Transgression

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Language & Literature and Arts  
Of Bard College

by

Fraiser Kansteiner

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

May 2016



## Acknowledgments

Like the Caesars invoked in the proem of Ovid's *Fasti*, there are many people in my life without whom this work would not have been possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank my brilliant advisers, Lauren Curtis, of the Bard Classical Studies Department, and Joseph O'Neill, of the Bard Written Arts Department. With their extensive advice and editing, they helped me develop the fundamental shape, as well as the finer details of this project, and ensured that every section was as successful as the last. I would also like to thank my original Written Arts adviser, Edie Meidav, who propelled my fiction forward and set in motion my literary career at Bard. Furthermore, I would like to thank Brad Morrow, Neil Gaiman, and Ben Hale, who taught me that 'fantasy' was not a dirty word, or even an accurate descriptor of genre. Similarly, I owe a great deal of thanks to Daniel Mendelsohn, Thomas Bartscherer, Carolyn Dewald, Diana DePardo-Minsky, and Rob Cioffi, all of whom encouraged and improved my budding classical education at Bard. Lastly, I owe a great deal of thanks to my parents and my peers, who provided the emotional support that kept me from lashing out in an invective rage during the arduous senior project process. To the boys at 9 Pine, the comrades at the C-Org, to Cyril, and to my loving partner, Charlotte, I have a great deal of thanks and appreciation to show over the next few weeks. Now that I am emerging, Cacus-like, from my academic cave, I hope to reciprocate all the love and support I've received throughout this year.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: What we write about when we write about Rome.....	5
Transgressive Translations: Ovid’s <i>Fasti</i> , the Poetry of Catullus, and Petronius’ <i>Satyricon</i> .....	6
Elegant Transgressions: An Analytical Examination of Misbehavior and the Translation Process.....	35
Ara Maxima: Fiction Inspired by Roman Literary Transgression.....	77
Works Cited.....	129

## **Introduction: What we write about when we write about Rome**

Rome looms large over every facet of my project, at times a city, at others, a force of history, but regardless of what meanings Rome accrues, it has consistently acted as the polestar by which I have charted my entire academic course at Bard. No facet of Rome is immune from my interest, but Roman literature, and Latin translation in particular, are the areas of classical study where I have repeatedly forged connections with authors and texts that transcend the two thousand year divide between Archaic Rome and the modern world. Even before the gates of Senior Project flung wide, I knew that I wanted to translate and dissect Roman literature, and also to tackle that literary tradition for the purpose of my own prose. While the thematic crux of my project has evolved over time, I have managed to successfully honor my original ambitions.

It may be clumsy to suggest that Rome was exceptionally modern for an ancient civilization, but the emphasis on distinct authorial voices and the contexts in which authors such as Catullus, Ovid, and Petronius were writing have certainly kept the Roman literary tradition relevant for well-over a dozen centuries. The wealth of criticism and introspection, as well as the comfort with profanity and satire displayed by these Roman writers, combine to make a powerful case for the appeal of ancient Roman literature in a world where post-modernism has become the norm. Many of my favorite pieces of Roman literature are also the nastiest; the most transgressive. Furthermore, these pieces, which originally attracted me due to their disaffection, further serve as exemplars of what I consider to be exceptionally modern voices in Roman literature. Transgression, it seems, engenders a sense of modernity, and this revelation marked the final maturation of my project's theme.

On the topic of Roman misbehavior, I have composed and ordered, in simple terms, selected translations from Ovid's *Fasti*, Petronius' *Satyricon*, and the collected poetry of

Catullus. This section will be followed by an analytical examination of transgression and translation in the works from the first section of the project. In addition to parsing the texts I have translated, this section also lays out a blueprint for what I hope to have achieved with my final prose piece. In the remaining section of my project, I have written an extended short-story inspired by *Fasti* 1.543-84, rooted in the myth of Hercules and Cacus.

Overall, my translations served as a means to familiarize myself with the content and the language of the writers I would be emulating, before I began the writing process. By reading these authors in the original Latin, I sought to develop a sense of the linguistic conventions they were establishing and eroding through their texts. Furthermore, this allowed me to examine more closely the etymological and aetiological resonances found in these texts, and in my prose, I sought convey a similar sense of tradition through diction.

In my fiction piece, I have attempted to reconcile a Romantic view of the natural landscape with a monstrous narrative voice. Throughout my translational and critical work, the myth of Hercules and Cacus repeatedly surfaced. I adore this sort of tale about the mythical struggle between heroes and monsters. In a sense, this narrative condenses everything I find externally appealing about the classical world into a single story cycle. It is a primal depiction of gods and demigods clashing over the civilization of the world. Action, mythology, and existential questions of place all surface within the boundaries of this oft-repeated story. Borrowing from the tradition of reinterpretation so central to Roman mythology, I sought to render this story in a distinctly modern context, inverting the perspective in order to examine the violation of legitimacy, humanity, and religion as a means to create meaning and place within the world.

# I.

## **Transgressive Translations:**

Ovid's *Fasti*, the Poetry of Catullus, and  
Petronius' *Satyricon*



**Proem—*Fasti* 1.1-62**

Times with their causes, divided throughout

The Latin year, and stars slipping below the

Earth, and rising, I shall sing. Receive this work

With placid expression, Caesar Germanicus,

And straighten the course of my timid vessel,

5

And by this gesture, do not spurn a light honor.

Behold! And attend the proper rites dedicated to

Your divinity. You will recognize ceremonies

Plucked from ancient chronicles, and by what

Purpose each day is fatefully recorded. Here you

10

Shall discover the festal days of your house; often,

You will read of your father, of your grandfather,

And they things they carry, marking the painted

Calendar. You will also curry favor with your brother,

Drusus. Let others sing about the arms of Caesar: We

15

Of Caesar's altars, and as many days as he added to

Our rites. Nod in assent at my effort to laud your

Own, and banish from my heart this timorous fear.

Give to me thou quiet self, and grant my poem

Strength. Genius halts and sinks with your face.

20

The page stirs before the learned princeps about

To pass judgment, as if sent to be read by

Apollo Claros. Indeed, we felt the eloquence of

Your cultivated voice, supporting the affairs of timid

Men with civil arms, and we know, when passion

25

Conveys you to our art, how great your river of talent

Flows. If it is permitted and right, poet, steer the poets'

Reins, that you heap happiness upon the whole year

With auspices.

Times were being distributed by the founder of

30

The city: He resolved that there should be twice

Five months in his year. Certainly, you knew arms

More than stars, Romulus, and conquering

Your neighbors was a greater care for you.

And by your rationale indeed, Caesar, you might

35

Have moved him, and his slight ought to be corrected.

As it was sufficient, he ordained that the time

For an infant to appear from its mother's womb

Was enough to mark a year. For just as many months

Following the funeral of her husband, see the melancholy

40

Wife uphold the widow's house. Thus, gowned

Quirinus viewed these things with care, when he

Gave the rough people the laws of the year. March,

The month of Mars, was first, and of Venus second;

She was first among the race; Mars

45

Was his father: The third came from the aged, the fourth

From the name of the youth. Those which came after

Were marked with numbers by the crowd.

But Numa neglected neither Janus nor the ancestral shades,

And thus placed two months before the antiquated ten.

50

Still, lest you are ignorant of the laws of the varying

Days, the offices of Lucifer are not always the same.

Those days will be unlawful when the three

Words are mute; those days will be lawful when its  
Legislation may be passed. Do not regard the laws to be 55

Steadfast for the whole day: That which is permitted now  
Was unspeakable this morning; for as soon as the vitals are  
Offered to the god, all things are permissible to discuss,  
And the words of the honored praetor grasp freedom.

There also exists a day when law is to enclose the 60  
Impeded populace; a day too which always returns by

Nine revolutions. Juno's attendant delivers the Ausonian  
Kalends; A great white ewe falls to Jove on the ides;

The Nones lack the protection of the god; that day  
Nearest to all of these (do not suffer deceits) will be 65

Black. The omen comes from occurrence; for on those  
Days Rome endured sad damnation under vindictive

Mars. May these things be uttered by me but once, adhering  
To the whole Calendar, lest I am compelled to

Rupture the sequence of occurrences.

70

**Hercules and Cacus—*Fasti* 1.543-85**

See the club-swinging hero who drives the

Erythean cattle here on his wearisome trek

Across the earth; treated hospitably

5

By the Tegean House, while untended,

His cattle wander through the wide fields.

It was first light: The Tyrrhene driver

Shook himself from sleep, then noticed two

Among his number of bulls to be missing.

10

Searching, his sight revealed no traces of the

Furtive theft—Savage Cacus had dragged them

Backwards into his cave—Cacus, terror and disgrace

Of the Aventine wood, who was no light

Menace to neighbors and foreigners alike.

15

His face was dread venom—his face

Like his body—his body immense (for

The father of this monster was volcanic  
Mulciber). For his house he possessed  
A vast cave riddled with deep recesses; 20  
Remote, for even beasts of the wild  
Could scarcely find it. Eyes and lips and  
Appendages adorned the threshold,  
fixed by nails across the post and lenti;  
The filthy soil blanched white with human bones. 25  
Jupiter's son was leaving with  
Some of his cattle suspiciously missing:  
Then the plunder let out a raucous  
Low—a bovine cry—from the site of Cacus' lair.  
'I accept the invitation' said Hercules, 30  
And following the sound through the  
Forest, the avenger arrived at the  
Wicked cave. Cacus proceeded to  
Arrange a barricade with fragments from

The mountain; ten double-yoked Oxen 35

    Could scarcely disturb this blockade.

Straining with his shoulders (for heaven once

    Rested upon them), and with great

Stress, Hercules dislodged the burden,

    And as soon as it was toppled, a crash 40

Stunned the ether itself; the earth

    Collapsed beneath the weight of the rubble.

First, Cacus tried to scuffle hand-to-hand,

    Waging war ferociously with rocks and trees.

When this did nothing, he fell back, bravery 45

    Fading, on the arts of his father, belching

Resounding flames from his mouth. You'd

    Think it were Typhoeus, dread patriarch,

Breathing with every blast, casting

    Sudden thunderbolts from Etna's flame! 50

The man once called Alcides seized him,

Settled his gnarled club three, four times into  
His opponent's face. Cacus collapsed, vomited  
Smoke mixed with blood and struck the  
Earth, dying, with his wide chest. 55

For this, the victor surrendered one bull to you,  
Jupiter, and summoned Evander and the rural folk.

There, he established an altar after himself, called  
'Greatest', where that part of the city is named

For the cattle it possesses. Nor did Evander's 60  
Mother hold her tongue about the time, nearly upon them,

When the earth had made sufficient use of its Hercules.



**Lupercalia—*Fasti* 2.267-302**

The third dawn to follow the ides

Beholds the nude Luperci, brother wolves,

And the rites of twin-horned Faunus ensue.

Tell, Pieredes, what the origin of these

Rituals is, and from whence they approached,

5

Seeking asylum in Latium. They say the

Ancient Arcadians honored Pan, god of flocks

And herds: He of the many Arcadian

Crests. Pholoe will witness it, as shall

Symphalian waves, and Ladon, hastened

10

Across the waters' surface towards the sea,

Shall bear witness too, and the pine-wreathed

Ridges of Nonacris' pasture, and high

Tricrene and the snows of Parrhasia.

Pan was the divinity of livestock, Pan

15

Was their divinity of horses, and they bore

Him gifts for keeping the creatures safe.

Evander transported his Sylvan divinities

With him: Here, where now a city stands,

There was then only the location of a city: 20

Hence the worship of the god by smuggled

Pelasgian rites, for these were ancient customs

To the priesthood of the Flamen Dialis.

Why, therefore, do they hasten, you ask,

And why (For this is the way they run) do they 25

Bear their bodies stripped of clothing? The

God himself loves to roam swiftly over the high

Hills, and he himself devises sudden flight:

The naked god orders his ministers to go as he,

In the nude; nor would clothes be suitable for 30

Racing. They claim that before the birth of Jove,

The Arcadians dominated the earth, and that

This race preceded even the moon. Their

Life was akin to that of feral beasts, driven

By no custom: a throng hitherto lacking in arts, 35

And uncultivated. They recognized leaves as

Their shelter, grass for their fruits; nectar was

Water drawn up by twin palms. No bull gasped

Beneath the crooked ploughshare, no land was

Subject to the cultivator's skills. No horse was 40

Used, moreover; each person comported

Himself: The goat proceeded, its body

Encased in wool. Under Jove they hardened,

Parading their naked bodies, acclimated as

They were to endure harsh rain and Notos' 45

Rough south winds. Now the unveiled ones

Likewise recall the monuments of the old

Customs, and testify to ancient wealth.

**Games of Ceres—*Fasti* 4.393-416**

Next, the Games of Ceres: Their reasons

Need not be declared; the grace and favor

Of the goddess are freely apparent. The

Bread of the first mortals was made of

Green herbs, which the earth produced

5

Untilled; and at that time they harvested

Lush grasses from the field. Then the treetops

Made a feast of supple leaves. Afterwards,

Acorns were found: It was good when the Acorn

Was discovered, and the durable oaks offered

10

Magnificent wealth. Ceres first founded better

Nutrition for men by replacing their acorns

With more nourishing food. She urged the

Bull to proffer his neck to the yoke: Then,

Upturned earth glimpsed sunlight for the first time.

15

Copper was valuable and the Chalybeian

Weight of iron was kept in concealment:

Alas, these ores ought to have been hidden  
Forever. Ceres abounds in peace, and you  
Should have pled, o farmers, for perpetual 20  
Harmony and a pacific leader. You are  
Permitted to esteem the goddess with spelt—  
Crumbs of salt and grains of incense upon the  
Primordial hearth. And should the incense be  
Absent, kindle anointed torches. Small things, 25  
Should they be pure in custom, placate good Ceres.  
Take your razors off the ox, allotted priests:  
The cow should face forward; Sacrifice slothful  
Pigs instead. The neck that is adapted to fit  
The Yoke should not be struck by the axe: 30  
Let him live, and may he work the harsh earth often.

**Lemuria—*Fasti* 5.419-54**

After Hesperus has revealed his handsome

Mug three times, and conquered stars yield thrice

To Apollo in this place, your ancient rites

Shall be confirmed, Nocturnal Lemuria: They will

Offer their hands to the silent dead.

5

The year ran shorter at that time, nor did men yet

Know of pious purification, nor did you conduct

The months, Two-Faced Janus: Nevertheless,

Extinguished ashes still retain their rewards

And a grandson was appeasing his sedate

10

Grandfather's tomb. The month was May,

Called after the name of the elders, *maiorum*,

Which clutches fragments of the former custom Still today.

Whence midnight now comes and

Offers silence for sleep, and you dogs, you

15

Piebald birds go still, he who is mindful  
Of the ancient rites and fearful of the gods  
Rises up (keeping his twin feet undressed)  
And signs with his thumb joined between  
The fingers, lest a trembling shade meet him 20  
Amid the silence. And when he has bathed  
His hands clean in the swell of the fountain,  
He rotates, having taken black beans beforehand,  
Casts them facing away. He throws them forth,  
‘These I send, with *these* beans,’ speaking, 25  
“I redeem me and mine.’ This is what he  
Says and he says it nine times, never glancing  
Back: He reckons a ghost will collect them  
And trail him unseen towards his home. He  
Touches the water in return; he rattles on 30  
Temesan bronze, and bids the shade adieu,  
Asking it to leave his homestead. When he has  
Spoken nine times, ‘depart, ancestral phantoms’,

He turns back, and considers the pure rite done.



**The Dinner Guest—*Catullus 13***

You'll dine well, my Fabullus, with Catullus,

And soon, if the gods are good to you;

If you turn up with a good and generous meal,

And booze, and seasoned wit, and loads of laughs.

Only if you bring these things, I say, will

5

You eat well, o pet of ours—For the wallet

Of your Catullus is full of cobwebs.

But in exchange, you'll get potent love,

Or something frillier and sweet: Here's that perfume

That my girl snagged from Venuses and Cupids:

10

A single whiff and you'll be begging the gods,

My Fabullus, to make you into a total nose.

**The Season for Giving—*Catullus 14***

If I didn't love you more than sight itself,

Openhanded Calvus, you better believe

I'd heap Vatinius' hatred on you for that gift:

For what did I do, what was said,

For you to shame me with so many shitty poets? 5

May the gods sew countless disasters for that

Client, who sent you so many godless men.

Because if Sulla the grammarian gave

That freshly recovered gift to you, as I have guessed,

It does me no harm. It's beautiful in fact, since you 10

Haven't squandered your arts. Gods!

What an awful and revolting scrap of paper,

Which you, naturally, have sent to your Catullus,

In order that he might have croaked that very

Day, the best of days, Saturnalia! No, you 15

Won't get off so easily, you little shit—

For, if at dawn, I should hit the shelves,

I will assemble every poison: Caesius,

Aquinas, and Suffenus' works; with these I'll

Reward your torture. Meanwhile, goodbye,

20

Get out of here where a wicked foot carried

You—villains of the day—lowliest of poets.

**Head Over Heels—*Catullus 17***

O Colonia, you who long to frolic on the far bridge,

And keep it primed to spring forth, but fear the

Inept little legs, suspended on hand-me-down

Planks, lest it go supine and sink down into the

Cavernous morass; thus let the bridge be as good

5

To you as you like, where even the rites

Of bouncing Mars might be performed.

For this, give to me, Colonia, a gift of deep

Laughter. I want a certain citizen of mine to

Go headlong from your bridge, head-over-heels

10

Into the muck, rightly, into the whole of the rotting

Swamp and the bruise-colored pond where the abyss

Runs deepest. The guy's an idiot, with all the sense of

A toddler dreaming in his father's swaying arms:

Although he's wedded to a real peach of a girl (and a

15

Girl more delicate than a tender kid must be kept

Harshly from the blackest vines) he lets her

Stray as she pleases, caring less than a hair.

Nor does he support her on his own behalf; he lies there

Like an alder in a ditch, felled by the Ligurian axe, 20

Perceiving it all as if no one was there:

Lo, the jackass who sees naught, hears naught,

Who doesn't even know who he is, himself; whether he

*Is* or he *isn't*. Now, I elect to send him prone from your

Bridge, if it's even possible to rouse this sluggish 25

Dolt; to abandon his backwards spirit into the thick

Mud, like a mule that loses its shoe in the stubborn bog.

**The Dinner Thief—*Catullus 25***

Thallus, you queer, softer than a hare's fur,

Or goose guts, or the lobe of a little ear,

Or an old codger's sickly cock, cobwebbed with neglect,

All this and still, Thallus, hungrier than a wild storm,

When the sloth god discloses sluggish observers,

5

Return my toga to me, which you pounced upon,

And my imported napkins and Spanish tapestries, you

Jackass, which you widely flaunt like antiquities.

Pry them from your talons at once and send them back,

Lest scorched whips hideously deface

10

Your downy ribs and supple little hands;

Then you'll thrash in an unprecedented fashion,

Like a raft caught in open waters by the raging wind.

**Drinking Song—*Catullus 27***

Boy Ganymede with the vintage Falernian,

Pour me more bitter cups, according

To the law of our mistress, Postumia—

More blitzed than the stuff left on the

Presses. Get out of here! Go wherever you want,

5

Crystal waters, you bane of wine, and seek out

The teetotalers: The Thyonian here is uncut.

**Grave Gifts—*Catullus 101***

Conveyed across countless countries, over countless seas,

I come, my brother, for these miserable funeral rites,

That I may give these gifts at last to the dead,

And speak in vain to your mute ashes, since you

Have been stolen from me by bitter misfortune. Oh,

5

Unhappy brother, shamefully snatched away. Now take

These gifts in the meantime, which have been passed

Down in the august style of our parents, unhappy gifts

For the grave, from a brother with many flowing tears.

Now for eternity, brother, hello and goodbye.

10



### **Trimalchio's Tomb—*Satyricon* 71-74**

Spread thin by this controversy, Trimalchio said, “Friends *and* slaves are people, and they drink equally the same milk, even if ill fortune shall take them by Surprise. Nevertheless, if I am healthy, they shall soon taste the water of liberation. To achieve this, I am releasing them all from my service in my will. Moreover, I shall appoint a parcel of land to Philagyrus, And to his tentmate, Cario, likewise, I leave an apartment block, his manumission fee, and a quilt. For I am fashioning Fortunata as my heir, and I entrust her to all of my good friends. And all this, therefore, in public, so that my whole family may love me now as much as they will when I am dead.”

They all began to give thanks to their master for his indulgence, when Trimalchio, dropping his joking mood, ordered that a copy of his will be brought out, and demanded that the whole thing be read aloud from beginning to end, eliciting a groan from the slaves. Then, looking back at Habinnas, Trimalchio said, “what do you say, my most beloved friend. Have you built my monument just as I ordered you to? I beg of you, decorate the Feet of my statue with my little bitch, and garlands, and unguents, and all the boxing matches of Petraitas, in order that your beneficence may let me live after death. Moreover, it should be one hundred feet In front; two-hundred feet in the ground. For indeed, I want every strain of fruit to flourish around my ashes, and an abundance of vines. It's an awfully wicked thing for a man to cultivate the house in which he lives, and to not curate that which he will inhabit for a longer time with his deceased. And therefore I wish to attach, on the front of the thing:

THIS MONUMENT DOES NOT FALL TO THE HEIR

Moreover my cares will be to me—I shall guard my will, that I not suffer wrongs in death. I am electing, indeed, one among the freedmen for the purpose of guarding my tomb, so that the rabble does not run up and shit all over it. I ask you, indeed, that you fashion ships at full sail proceeding on the front of my grave, and depict me, seated in the tribune, toga-clad, with five golden signet rings, showering the public with coins from a small purse; indeed, you recall how I gave that feast and distributed twin denarii to all. Fashion, for me, if it is agreeable to you, the triple dining couch. Fashion the face of the whole populace having a sweeter time amongst themselves. Place a statue of Fortunata to my right, holding Venus' dove, leading a small dog fastened to her belt, and my little Cicero, and prolific amphorae—gypsum-sealed—to keep the wine from pouring out. And if it's permitted, sculpt me a fractured urn, and a boy crying over it. And place a sun dial in the midst of it all, so that anyone inspecting the hour, like it or not, must read my name. Likewise the inscription—take a careful look, and tell me if this seems apt enough for you:

HERE LIES GAIUS POMPEIUS TRIMALCHIO  
OF MAECENAS WHO WAS ELECTED TO THE  
POSITION OF SEVIR IN HIS ABSENCE;  
HE COULD HAVE BEEN ON EVERY JURY  
IN ROME YET HE REFUSED;  
PIOUS AND STALWART AND TRUE,  
FROM LITTLE HE ARRIVED AT WEALTH  
AND LEFT 300 SESTERCES

AND HE NEVER HEARD A SINGLE PHILOSOPHER.

FAREWELL, TRIMALCHIO, AND TO YOU!”

## **II.**

### **Elegant Transgressions:**

An Analytical Examination of the Translation  
Process

## **Elegant Transgressions:**

### **Vitriol and Misbehavior in Roman Poetry and Prose**

The fact that ancient Rome was so meticulously ordered is precisely what allows us to study it in-depth today. Roman life was curated and recorded. Customs were passed down and established firmly in the public consciousness, and historians such as Livy, or politicians like Augustus and Julius Caesar, paid great attention to the laws and edicts enacted by rulers of the past, present, and future. This order comes down to us in a number of forms. There are, foremost, the literal laws of the Roman state, yet those are of less concern to us. More interesting are the customs surrounding religious thought and practice—the social behaviors and expectations present in moments of mirth. By translating literature that not only deals in festivals, dinners, and other Roman social engagements, but also explores the formation of rules and the transgression of those rules, I have illuminated what makes these indecent authors so appealing to a modern audience.<sup>1</sup>

In my work, I sought to extract something valuable about the appeal of transgression. Dissent, misbehavior, and profanity in particular constitute thrilling moments of textual transgression, which undercut Rome's austere ordered façade. In some ways, these transgressive authors' regard or distaste for rules and customs make them feel more modern to us. They display an awareness of Roman morality and social decorum, and they deliberately work outside of these mores. Catullus often feels like our man in Rome, while Ovid displays such a virtuosic comprehension of Roman myth and history that it is impossible not to be taken with his verse. Despite the superficial patriotism of his work, Ovid's poetry also harbors a dark,

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations used are mine unless otherwise noted.

dissentious side, which delights in subverting the systems of authority present in Augustan Rome. Petronius, on the other hand, deals in pure, raunchy satire, situated in the decadent trappings of Rome under the Emperor Nero. Each author's awareness of their place and time, coupled with their literary means of resistance, speaks to us on a modern level. It is why Rome, and why these authors and pieces in particular, have continued to resonate with audiences for centuries.

To begin with, I shall examine Ovid's calendrical work, the *Fasti*, which reaches back through time to extract and parade the various myths that inform the Roman festival year. In particular, I examined the proem of the work, as well as the poems on Hercules and Cacus, the Lupercalia, the Games of Ceres, and the Lemuria. Ovid provides the underlying basis for this project insofar as he offers the most foundational text. While he is not chronologically first in the cohort of Roman authors I selected, the content of his *Fasti* is preeminent insofar as it reaches into Rome's ancient, mythologized past. In establishing the Roman calendar, he establishes the order of the entire year. Moreover, he is articulating the order of celestial bodies, of the world beyond Rome, extending the power of empire to the stars. In many ways, Ovid's *Fasti* is both an aetiological work, and an assertion of Rome's own mythological legitimacy. He is both exploring and composing Roman myth on the fly, seeking explanations for things as he finds them and inserting his own when he doesn't. Furthermore, while the *Fasti* may appear patriotic on its face, its composition closely coincided with Ovid's exile from Rome by Augustus, and aspects of the poet's dissent are present, albeit in subtle, muted ways.<sup>2</sup>

The very proem of the work deals in the language of *fas* and *nefas*, lawful and unlawful—a deeply-rooted Roman concept that resists translation into English, but whose meaning is

---

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Ovid", in particular the section on the *Fasti*

made evident in the sociopolitical functions of the similarly etymologized calendar, or *Fasti*. While the calendar has many different names in Latin, Ovid intentionally chose the term etymologically tethered to the language of *fas* and *nefas*—both terms rooted in the ancient Latin verb *fari*, meaning, “to speak”. What is right in the *Fasti* is what is permissible to say, and in a world in which *carmina et error*, a poem and a mistake, can lead to banishment, the notion of what the poet is permitted to speak about becomes a contentious political issue. Each part of the poem, whether the focus is the battle between Hercules and Cacus, or the Games of Ceres, explores this same concept of just and unjust; of the repeatable and the unspeakable. Ovid deals less directly with explicit, linguistic transgression, exactly because he is reaching into the past to develop a fixed system of customs and histories for Rome. Ovid’s usefulness lies in his ability to highlight the values and rules from myth that are held in the highest regard by Rome. Furthermore, his *Fasti* originates from a time of political and social uncertainty in the poet’s life. Ovid’s calendar poem coincides with the earliest stages of his Black Sea exile, and as such, it incorporates subtle criticisms at Augustus’ own attempts to order the world, Roman and otherwise.

Profanity and violence, on the other hand, constitute explicit textual transgression, and this brand of linguistic subversion is par for the course in Catullus’ poetry. Catullus’ profanity tends to be the element of his poetry that makes him so immediately intriguing to modern audiences. It excites us because expletives have only recently become proper literary fare in our own modern canon. His obscenities lend an otherwise formally meticulous body of work a seemingly casual edge. Seeking to isolate Catullus at his absolute nastiest, I worked with poems 13, 14, 17, 25, 27, and 101. This selection of songs covers topics ranging from dinner parties and the Saturnalia, to violent retribution, to bitter lamentations at the grave of a loved one. I sought to

establish a complete image of the poet as defined by his poetic persona. Nevertheless, I was also, unashamedly, searching for the most transgressive works—poems which highlighted the volatile linguistics of Roman invective. Despite many learned allusions to Greece, despite the composition of other poems which directly imitate the form of Greek epic, Catullus' cruelty and profanity create a poetic persona easily relatable to modern audiences. Because Catullus seems to violate the etiquette of his day, his poetic persona appears to exist outside of Roman society. He rides the razor's edge between decency and delinquency, and to watch the venomous machinations of his mind play out on the page forces us to reconcile our notions of Roman decorum with the vitriol through which Catullus navigates an intricate network of social exchanges. We are united with the poet in his passions and his outrage, and invited more meaningfully into Rome by a figure that clearly understands its customs, and violates them all the same, while simultaneously exposing us to the rawest facets of human emotion.

Catullus' profanity also constitutes one of the greatest translational enigmas encountered during this project. While the sentiment of his vulgarity can certainly be gleaned by classicists, the language must be updated in order for Catullus' attacks to remain relevant in a modern setting. Indeed, this nuanced form of attack presented me with myriad problems during the translation process. Since profanity is precisely what, to me, makes Catullus feel so modern more than two thousand years later, there is a push to over-modernize the translation. Catullus' anger, and the language with which he lashes out or laments, resonates so powerfully in the modern mind that I often felt inclined to shed the Roman trappings of his poems altogether—to render something distinctly contemporary that just so happened to be more than two millennia old. Nevertheless, Catullus' poetic persona is painstakingly manufactured. Even though Catullus may feel like 'our man in Rome', we cannot make such dangerous leaps in perception. To associate



too closely with the poet, to inhabit his mental space and update the edge of his language, is to ignore the distinctly Hellenizing features of his poetry and the glimpses of elite Roman life that shine through his verse. This was my greatest translational quagmire—the urge to reconcile the modernity of Catullus’ language with the learned and elite features at the heart of its formulation.

Finally, Petronius delivers one of the most seemingly modern pieces of Roman satire in the format of a novel. While the novel itself is an ancient form of writing, it has certainly seen more popularity as a modern mode of literature, and by applying M.M. Bakhtin’s analysis of heteroglossia in the novel to Petronius’ ancient work, I hope to extract the dual modes of discourse most responsible for the transgressive nature of the *Satyricon*. Not only are the scenes and characters of Petronius’ *Satyricon* incredibly subversive because of the way they mock Roman society under Nero, but the very format of the piece, as a long-form piece of prose, challenges the tradition of Roman poetry as the primary means of fictive social commentary. Of particular interest to me in this piece is the way in which characters transgress Roman social structure by climbing up the ranks and reversing their fortunes. Trimalchio, a Gatsby-esque figure, hosts a luxurious party in the section of the novel I chose to translate. Despite his abundant wealth, his previous life was that of a slave and much of his ambition is tethered to this shift in social order. In this section, all the excesses of Roman society are brought to light. Nevertheless, their garishness is dampened by the position of the characters as slaves and ex slaves. Furthermore, the characters, largely members of the Roman underclass thrust into the upper echelons of society, are shown repeatedly dishing out severe punishments to the slaves who currently serve them. Standards of decency are violated, and a cycle of violence and victimization is perpetrated under the nouveau riche of Rome.

The *Satyricon* rounds out my examination of transgression and order in Rome both formally, thematically, and linguistically. While Petronius omits the elaborate profanity found in Catullus, or the highly rigid, mythological structure of Ovid's *Fasti*, his novel comprises a radical critique of Rome. Petronius subverts the authority of empire, reveals the hypocrisy of wealth and class, and generally lambasts Roman social order by portraying it at its most decadent. Notions of proper mourning are addressed as well in Trimalchio's elaborate description of his tomb. Here, Petronius challenges conceptions of cult and post-mortem veneration by portraying characters with an unhealthy fixation on death. Ultimately, I sought to honor Petronius in the same manner as Catullus, by updating what seemed like distinctly modern conceptions and critiques into contemporary English. Colloquialisms and phrases presented the greatest problems in these sections. Certain terms had to be transformed to retain any meaning, but overall, Petronius' words ring true in our modern age. Most of his references are not so foreign that they defy understanding, and those that feel distinctly Roman only serve to further dramatize the decadence of new money at Rome.

Roman order and the shattering of that order were themes that emerged gradually throughout the composition of my project, not fully recognizable until I began work on my creative fiction piece based on the Hercules and Cacus myth. In many ways, my prose-piece is the culmination of my translation and analytical efforts. This story, which details the slaying of an Ogre-shepherd named Cacus by the Greek hero Hercules, appears across many Roman texts, and most interestingly for our purposes, in Ovid's *Fasti*. Here, more so than in any other rendering by Virgil or Livy,<sup>3</sup> Cacus is portrayed as a literal monster, descended from Vulcan and capable of breathing terrible fire. The mythic possibilities of Ovid's *Fasti*, coupled with the

---

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, I use Lombardo's 2005 translation of the *Aeneid*, and Warrior's 2006 translation of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*. See AUC 1.7.4-7 and *Aeneid* 8.214-315 for different versions of Cacus myth.

culturally Hellenizing implications of Hercules' violent trek across the Mediterranean, make for an incredibly layered and troubling piece.

Just as this myth has been reinterpreted by multiple authors across several different genres, I wanted to provide my own take on the Hercules and Cacus story. Savage Cacus, who steals Hercules' cows and tries to conceal them from the hero in vain, embodies the ugliness and transgression I grew so close to during the process of translation. He challenges the order and authority of the proto-Roman countryside, terrorizing the Arcadians until Hercules must put him in his place. This pacification of beasts lays the groundwork for the establishment of Roman order. Hercules' club is the pacifying tool that primes the proto-Roman countryside for the course of progress, the imposition of order. Nevertheless, I was not content to leave this story as it was. It was my ambition to further unravel the character of Cacus, and explore the customs at play both before and after the encounter with Hercules.

Morality and rules are complex things, and in the case of Rome, they seem to come from multiple sources, ancient and obscure. Although we have limited access to the documents of early Roman history, and although we must deal with varying accounts of Evander, his Arcadians, and the shepherd-turned-monster terrorizing the Italic hills, value remains in the examination of these things. Informed by the order and transgression that appeared in my translations, I created a mythological world interested in exploring itself, in exploring the place of myth and its frequently mercurial character. Although my piece, "The Cacus Cycle", is set in the days before Rome has been established, it foresees the arrival of Rome, and also looks back to a time before Evander and his Arcadians. I sought to expand these notions of order and transgression into the realm of the conqueror and the conquered—to observe the place of rules and customs in the establishment of new cultures, and the transitory nature of even the strongest

states. By staging the narrative from the monster's perspective, I sought to commit the greatest transgression of all. To rip the narrative of monster slaying from the hero's hands. I have done this in order to examine the effects of violent pacification, unwanted authority, and the clash of cultures on a place and on an individual. Through the lens of Cacus' brutish eye, I have attempted to isolate the rules and customs most vital to Rome, and the misbehaviors and transgressions we find so appealing.

### **1. Ovid's *Fasti***

Ovid's calendar poem, the *Fasti*, is in many ways a history of Roman culture, and Roman religion. Nevertheless, the *Fasti* circumvents the typical historical narrative established by writers such as Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus by refusing to adhere to a strict chronology. While Ovid is certainly interested in the historical past, he moves back and forth in time as it suits the narrative, which follows the distribution of festal days in the Roman calendar. The *Fasti*, as an annual history of Rome, provides a mytho-historical backdrop for the customs and celebrations of the emerging empire. As such, it sets up the boundaries and the strictures which define the code of conduct that Catullus and Petronius will shatter. Nevertheless, Ovid is subtly transgressive in his own right, and we need only look at the timeframe in which he composed his *Fasti* in order to recognize this.<sup>4</sup> In alluding to the natural forces that order the world, Ovid reduces Augustus' own authority to order the world according to Roman customs. Ovid's work about the order of the Roman year ironically protests the attempt of the Romans to order the greater world outside of Rome.

---

<sup>4</sup> On the timeline of Ovid's exile and poetic composition, see Boyle and Woodard 2004: xxv-xxix.

Translating Ovid's *Fasti*, I struggled to reconcile the clarity of the lines with the immensely learned allusions the poet makes throughout the text. Because he is reaching into the distant past, ruminating upon the mythologies of primitive Rome, as well as Greece, these references are vital to the greater message of the work. Nevertheless, they pose a challenge to the average, modern reader, who may not be acclimated to the intense specificity of Ovid's sources. I frequently added clarifying language around these allusions, but kept the original language of the references themselves, in an effort to preserve Ovid's original words. The stateliness of this piece is essential to the poetic voice, and more so than in Catullus or Petronius, I sought to portray an air of antiquity in my rendering of the text.

Ovid's work serves the purpose of ordering the Roman world, of examining the central dichotomy between *fas* and *nefas*—lawful and unlawful, which dictates the course of the entire year. Overall, the calendar becomes a symbol of Rome's greater ambition to order the universe. The use of celestial movements, of stars and planetary migrations to denote the passage of time align Rome's annual cycle with that of the universe. Ovid's calendrical narrative provides a cosmic explanation for the customs and laws at Rome. Outlining his poetic program, Ovid exclaims in the proem, "*pagina iudicium docti subitura movetur principis, ut Clario missa legenda deo,*" that "the page stirs before the learned princeps about to pass judgment, as if sent to be read by Apollo Claros" (Fast. 1.19-20). This page, which we are to assume is the *Fasti* itself, is depicted in a distinctly judicial setting. This princeps, or first citizen, alludes to a title taken by Augustus to indicate his rank of authority. Furthermore, the princeps is on the cusp of some sort of lawful decision. The *Fasti*, as an accessory to that dispensation of justice, becomes a sort of treatise as to what is right. It is to be read by Augustus as one reads an oracle, which is to say, while the interpretation may vary, fault cannot be found in the original message. Ovid is

at once protecting his poem, and also situating it within the formalized Roman world. Furthermore, Ovid's use of *Fasti* to describe the calendar marks a deliberate choice by the poet to invoke the etymological link between *fasti*, *fas*, *nefas*, and the archaic Roman verb for 'to speak', *fari*.<sup>5</sup> Here, Ovid's ambitions of ordering the calendar according to Roman myth is made more clear. What is striking, however, is that Ovid, the poet, is determining what is repeatable and unspeakable, rather than the princeps or the legal officials who would have actually presided over such matters in Rome. In this sense, artistic authority supersedes political clout, and indeed, the very nature of the calendar itself, as a physical, painted record of the year, is itself a form of organizational art.

Carrying this language of the poem even further, Ovid states, "*si licet et fas est, vates rege vatis habenas, auspice tu felix totus ut annus eat,*" that "if it is permitted and right, poet, steer the poets' reigns, that you bring happiness to the whole year with auspices." (Fast. 1.25-6). Once more, Ovid filters his verse through the language of what is *fas*, or lawful. Indeed, this is a difficult word to translate, not unlike the Latin *Pietas*, which stands somewhere between religious piety and civic duty. *Fas* is what is proper, but it also carries a sense of legal propriety. It is also what is permissible to say, raising the issue of the poet's autonomy to compose and recite what he or she wishes. *Fas* is what is proper, morally, lawfully, and culturally.<sup>6</sup> The following allusion to auspices and a sort of fateful good cheer speak more to a metaphysical sense of right and wrong, and I sought to reflect this ambiguity in my translation of *fas* as "right", rather than lawful, in this instance. When Ovid mentions lawfulness and unlawfulness in the presence of a princeps passing judgment, there is clearly an administrative context to the word. At other times, what is *fas* becomes considerably less tangible. Nevertheless, we must

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on Ovid's use of '*Fasti*', see Boyle and Woodward 2004: xxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v. "Fasti".

keep in mind that while Ovid is ostensibly writing this work to celebrate the empire's ordering of the world, it is Ovid himself, from the seat of the poet, who is actually responsible for this canonization of *fas* and *nefas*. In this sense, the entire poem stands as a subtle protestation of Augustus' futile efforts to control the world at large. Ultimately, it is Ovid's art, rather than Augustus' law, which persists, and which successfully codifies the year.

Ovid more clearly demonstrates the ordering of the Roman world through the myth of Hercules and Cacus in the first book of the *Fasti*. Hercules, as a forceful arbiter of Greek rites, assists Evander and Carmenta—themselves inhabitants of Italy recently emigrated from Greece—in suppressing the feral Italic forces opposing the proto-Roman countryside. In slaying the monstrous, indigenous Cacus, Hercules pacifies the barbarous forces disrupting the establishment of Roman law. Naturally, this Roman law requires supremacy over the land, which Hercules grants by slaying the ogre Cacus, and by commemorating the death with a monument—a physical marker which establishes Roman myth permanently upon the earth. This altar, like the calendar itself, is a physical manifestation of culture. Physical monuments precede Ovid's annual poetry, but directly inform it, as if it were subsuming the functions of cultural monuments into a single, expansive text. The myth itself coincides with the feast of the goddess Carmenta on January 11th, Carmenta being a goddess of prophecy, and of technological innovation. Of Evander and Carmenta, Livy writes, "he was revered for his wonderful skill with the alphabet, a novelty among men who were untutored in such arts. He was even more revered on account of his mother, Carmenta, who was believed to be divine and was admired as a prophetess before the Sibyl's arrival in Italy." (Livy 1.7.7-8). Carmenta is associated with letters, with the Sibylline books, and furthermore, she is the mother of Evander, who, exiled from Greece, imported Hellenic rites and customs to Italy in a pre-Aeneas era. The Greekness and the civilizing

emphasis of these figures prepare us for the Hercules myth, adding a civilizing weight to his club, which carries the force of political pacification in every swing. Hercules, as a Greek, will be shown to pacify the Latin wilderness. Nevertheless, it is not until the erection of the Ara Maxima, a physical, artistic commemoration of the slaying, that Hercules' deed is confirmed. Ovid accentuates the heroic aspects of the myth, invoking the epic tradition which Carmenta's symbols permit the Roman people to enjoy, and expand upon. Furthermore, the influence of characters and symbols alludes to the greater role of the calendar itself, often described as "painted" by Ovid, who tethers its chronological purposes with the almost literary, artistic nature of its invention.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the erection of the Ara Maxima signals a collision between mythic and artistic Greece, resulting in the birth of a surpassing state and culture: That of the Roman people. The calendar comprises not only a pragmatic, political blueprint of the Roman year, but also a cultural one, defined by festivals and myths inextricable from the concept of Roman identity. The foundation of the Ara Maxima speaks to both of these camps. Hercules' slaying is an act of law. He answers Cacus' transgressions against the Arcadian people with death, and the altar becomes a physical manifestation of the order newly established; a cultural monument and object of celebration influenced by a practical act of pacification.

Ovid introduces the story of Hercules and Cacus *in medias res*, invoking the epic tradition of the myth established by Virgil while simultaneously reminding the reader of the scope of Hercules' long, civilizing trek across the known world.<sup>8</sup> 'Ecce', commands Ovid, bidding us to look, via the language of sight, at the spectacular ordeal about to be enacted. Cacus, as the central antagonist of the myth, is made immediately visible. Ovid's portrayal of the monster, which differs from that of other, strictly historical authors, accentuates the heroism of

---

<sup>7</sup> Ovid's *Fasti* 1.10-1

<sup>8</sup> See *Aeneid* 8.214-315



Hercules, and the grandeur of his civilizing narrative. Of Cacus, the poet claims, “*diro viro facies, vires pro corpore, corpus grande, pater monstri Mulciber huius erat,*” that “his face was horrible, his face like his body, his body immense (for the father of this monster was grim Mulciber),” (Ovid 1.553-4), providing a distinct, physical impression of the cattle wrangler. His visage is dreadful, venomous. His body is as atrocious as his face, and hulking, for the monster is descended, Ovid says, from fiery Vulcan. These features are delivered in rapid succession, without conjunctions, and in my translation, I attempted to preserve the overwhelming sense of terror conveyed by Ovid’s clipped and comfortless verse. Furthermore, Ovid breaks the rules of traditional historical narrative in this passage, veering into the fiery spectacle of epic.

Overall, I found it vital to express the sheer physicality of Ovid’s Cacus and Hercules myth, insofar as it corroborates the observable, monumental Greekness of Evander and Carmenta’s letters, and the Ara Maxima erected by Hercules. Physical space and objects, as well as physical altercations, are central to this visibility, to the activated nature of Ovid’s account. Cacus does not merely live in some dark and formless cave; rather, “*Ora super postes adfixaque bracchia pendent, squalidaque humanis ossibus albet humus,*”—“eyes and appendages adorn the threshold, fixed by nails across the doorframe, and the filthy soil blanches with human bones.” (Ovid 1.557-8). I have translated this to reflect the physical grotesqueness of Ovid’s myth. His use of verbs such as ‘albo’, which imply visual transformation—in this case to blanch or make white—along with the tangibility of corporal nouns such as ‘ora’ and ‘bracchium’, or the visceral force of the participle ‘adfixus’, cause us, as readers, to become transfixed, like so many human limbs over Cacus’ door, by the spectacle of this monster, and by the heroic fight in which he will be vanquished. In the versions of this myth recounted by Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cacus is little more than a villainous barbarian. Livy depicts him as “a ferociously strong

shepherd called Cacus, an inhabitant of the area.” (Livy 1.7.5). The Cacus of Livy is perfectly mortal, and his greatest crime is being foolish enough to tussle with a hero as powerful as Hercules. Nevertheless, Ovid, following the epic tradition established by Virgil in book 8 of his *Aeneid*, depicts Cacus as “a half-human monster, an ogre,” (Virgil 8.226). Ovid and Virgil’s Cacus is a literal fire-breathing monster whom Hercules naturally needs to defeat in order to ready the land for the development of the cultured and civilized Roman state. If Cacus is a monster, then Hercules is all the more heroic for defeating him, and the drama of their fight is increased. Ovid depicts Cacus in this way so that he might heighten the spectacle of the myth, placing early Rome securely within the Greek traditions of heroics, of semi-divine skirmishing. Furthermore, this dramatized account better emphasizes the authority of human law upon the land. Cacus is a primordial force of wickedness and raw violence which must be pacified in order for Rome to lay down its laws. Cacus’ crime of theft is not unique to the immortals. In fact, the crime itself is rather mundane, more suited to petty thieves than rampaging ogres, raising the question of what Cacus’ monstrosity ultimately achieves. Had Hercules merely murdered another man for stealing his cattle, the punishment would have been unjust. By installing Cacus as a monster who torments the Aventine, Ovid implies the necessity of his defeat. Ovid’s decision to depict Cacus as a monster might constitute a retroactive, literary decision, less influenced by the myth proper than by the poet’s obligations to create a bombastic mythical base for the Roman year. Hercules is not vilified in this section, although he has faced such criticism from authors such as Livy.<sup>9</sup>

This particular passage culminates in the erection of the Ara Maxima, the Greatest Altar, by Hercules and Evander in what will become the Forum Boarium, or cattle market, of Rome.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Livy’s *AUC* 1.7.5, and in particular, the role Hercules’ drunkenness played in the theft.

Looking ahead to the promised age of Roman dominion, Carmenta furthermore delivers a curious bit of Latin regarding the fate of Hercules and other heroes of his ilk. “*Non tacet Evandri mater prope tempus adesse Hercule quo tellus sit satis usa suo,*” writes Ovid, stating “nor did Evander’s mother hold her tongue about the time, nearly upon them, when the earth had made sufficient use of its Hercules.” (Ovid 1.583-4). Carmenta is linked to Evander once more, recalling the uniquely erudite nature of their respective Greek innovations. What’s more, Hercules, whom Ovid has shown as nothing less than heroic thus far, is depicted as a member of a dying breed. Ovid’s use of the possessive ‘suo’ connotes ownership over Hercules, here by the world, but perhaps more generally by the head of the world, Rome. Ovid orders the mythic, literary world of Rome and further demonstrates his dominion over it but introducing and revoking Hercules in nearly the same breath. He portrays a certain mortal authority of this Greek demigod by demonstrating his own ability to include or omit Hercules at a moment’s notice. Additionally, Rome has appropriated this hero from Greece. As appreciated as his monster slaying is, it merely paves the way for the greater, future achievements promised under the Roman state. Evander, who gave Latium Greek religion, and Carmenta, who invented the very language with which Ovid composes his exquisite verse, are celebrated—as figures of technological advancement, cultural innovation—over brutish Hercules, suggesting that Roman virtue ultimately amounts to something greater than physical violence, even when that violence may be as heroic, as civilizing, as Hercules’ murder of Cacus. Furthermore, this passage may allude to the poet’s completion of his own epic, the *Metamorphoses*, before the composition of the *Fasti*. Such stories about grand combats and heroes are no longer as relevant in a work like the *Fasti*, where Ovid attempts to impose a manmade order on the world. Once more, we can

take Ovid's statements about the arrangement of the world as metatextual ruminations on his own poetic path.

Thus, violence becomes an act of transgression, just as Cacus' cattle theft transgressed against Hercules. The hero's murder of Cacus is commemorated and sealed off as an artifact of the past. Carmenta and Evander, as the figures who truly lead Italy towards its Roman future, emphasize the value of letters and laws over tri-knotted clubs. Ovid accentuates the value of literature, of the book as a phenomenon and his poetry book in particular as a document of Roman law and order—law and order which could not exist without the violent pacification of Cacus, but which now forbids that same, antiquated aggression.

Ovid further expresses the civilizing function of the calendar and of his ordering book by using the movement of celestial bodies to connote the passage of time. In book 2 of the *Fasti*, Ovid introduces his discussion of the Lupercalia by stating, "*Tertia post idus nudos aurora Lupercos aspicit,*" that "the third dawn to follow the Ides beholds the nude *Luperci*, brother wolves." (Ovid 2.267-8). Ovid conflates the advanced, civilized date-keeping of the Ides, part of the Roman calendar, with the more primitive timekeeping of the movement of suns and stars. Thus, we become uniquely aware of the power of the calendar, and of Ovid's mythic aetiology, to allow the Romans to tame the earth, to order the natural world, and to organize things to their advantage. In terms of translation, these transitions are somewhat problematic, insofar as the rotation of the sun and moon lack the same significance for a modern audience less familiar with astronomy. Nevertheless, the archaisms of this model of time effectively communicate the extent of Italy's primitivism before the importation of Greek rites, before the establishment of the calendar and of Roman religious practices. This notion is reinforced by Ovid's later descriptive statement "*ante Iovem genitum terras habuisse feruntur Arcades, et luna gens prior illa fuit,*"

that “they claim that before the birth of Jove, the Arcadians dominated the earth, and that this race preceded even the moon.” (Ovid 2.290-1). Ovid clearly establishes cosmic behaviors as ancient and incorruptible in this passage. They are fixed, and refer to the most ancient, observable periods of time. Furthermore, Ovid legitimizes the authority of Rome by linking their predecessors, the Arcadians, to a time so remote, so divine, that it predated the arrival of Jupiter himself. Like a microcosm of the entire poem, Ovid reconciles the mythic history and lore of Rome’s murky past, an act of legitimization, with the advancements of the city’s modern wealth and dominion. Alternately, Ovid’s reliance on astral phenomena may also be considered a rejection of artificial Augustan authority. By alluding to a cosmic power beyond earth, beyond Rome, Ovid critiques the attempts of the empire to order the universe. Ovid is both proving that Rome has origins in the established, respected traditions of Greece, and also demonstrating Rome’s capacity to expand upon and move beyond these archaic customs. That said, the limits of Rome’s earthly power may be present in the constant, astronomical chronology of the poem.

This trope of celestial ordering appears again in Book 5 of the *Fasti*, before Ovid’s description of Lemuria, which I translated in order to develop an understanding of the Roman customs surrounding death and purification. In this instance, however, the segue is even more bogged down by mythic implications. Ovid states, “*Hinc ubi protulerit formosa ter Hesperos ora, ter dederint Phoebos sidera victa locum, ritus erit veteris, nocturna Lemuria, sacri,*” that “after Hesperus has revealed his handsome face three times, and conquered stars yield thrice to Apollo in this place, your ancient rites shall be confirmed, nocturnal Lemuria.” (Ovid 5.419-21). Within these lines, Ovid infuses the meaningfully secure rotations of the heavens with Hellenizing deities, further implying that Rome conquers, incorporates, and surpasses the commendable achievements of Greece. Furthermore, the rotations of the heavens are bound to

the notion of lawfulness elicited in the earliest sections of the poem. Hesperus and Apollo both denote astral events which are immutable, regardless of who perceives them, yet Ovid further chooses to codify these movements in Greek terms. Ovid emphasizes the most ancient roots of Roman cultural practice as he prepares to grapple with one of the hoariest facets of human existence: death. Translating such idiomatic and culturally specific transitions poses a unique problem, insofar as the nature of Hesperus and Phoebus might be lost upon a modern audience. What's more, the exact passage of time which Ovid describes might be difficult to decipher for those who do not recognize the significance of Hesperus as a planetary body, or of Apollo as the sun, and subsequently, the arrival each successive day. At his most poetic, Ovid is also overtly Hellenic, and while such references might prove too obscure for a modern translation, any dramatically differing portrayal of the passage of time, any attempts to elucidate the intervals at play, risks abandoning the vital archaicism of the passage. I have therefore elected to keep the Greek allusions fully intact, consigning any further explanation to a footnote.

Indeed, Ovid's use of time in general is incredibly meaningful to the success of the *Fasti*, which reflects Roman history, from its earliest recorded history, through moments of mythic prehistory, as the Roman citizen would have experienced it, through the celebration of festal days and religious celebrations. Furthermore, the regions of time which Ovid explores correspond directly to his main intent in any given passage. For instance, much of his portrayal of the Lupercalia speaks to the moments before the founding of Rome, but well after Evander carried over Greek practices to the Italic wilderness. The language here is foundational, and clearly alludes to Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>10</sup> Ovid begins relating the origins of the holiday with the statement, '*dicite, Pierides*'; a command to speak, to tell of events, that echoes the invocation of

---

<sup>10</sup> See Virgil's *Aeneid* 1.1-15.

the muses popular in the proems of so much epic poetry. He describes the Greek rites of the festival “*attigerent Latias unde petita domos,*” as “seeking a home in Latium,” which resonates with Aeneas’ own journey and exile from Troy in search of a new fatherland (Ovid 2.270). The Pierides themselves are the muses, and the journey of Evander’s “transported forest divinities” a foundational epic. Adding to this interpretation, Ovid states, in reference to the site where Evander carried his rites, “*hic, ubi nunc urbs est, tunc locus urbis erat,*” that, “here, where now there is a city [Rome], there was, in [Evander’s time], merely the place which would one day become such a city.” (2.280).

Thus we are reminded not only of the founding of the city and the importance of Evander’s imported Greek rites to this founding, but also of the fact that Rome’s rise to power has been foretold. Ovid transgresses the boundaries of time in the *Fasti*, which is especially striking considering the strict order of the poem as arranged by the months of the calendar year. Greece is rooted in the ancient, mythic past, and legitimizes Roman practice, but Rome itself is distinctly associated with the future; Rome is part of a new age of artistic and civic dominion that doubles as a culmination of everything Greek culture has accomplished. This description of the site where Evander carries his Greek rituals, which moves between Ovid’s contemporary Rome and a time before the boundaries of city were even set, speaks to the confusion of past, present, and future—to the subtle collusion between mythic tradition and cultural innovation within the unique milieu of the burgeoning Roman Empire, expressed throughout the *Fasti* by Ovid’s decision to order time based on the calendar, rather than the chronological succession of events.

Within his detailing of the Games of Ceres in lines 4.393-416 of the *Fasti*, Ovid moves even further into the mythic past, to a time before the arrival of the Arcadians when the first men had yet to develop agriculture or religion. Here, Ovid demonstrates the function of religion and

its origins amongst the Roman people, amongst humanity in general. Before the intervention of Ceres in the affairs of mortals, the religious perceptions of the native Italians were as uncultivated as their fields. Thus, the direct benefits offered by the gods provide justification for the performance of religious rites as a sort of extended thanksgiving to the deities who played an integral role in the development of the civilized world. Ovid now demonstrates *why* these ceremonies are *fas*, or lawful and right. The poet begins by illustrating the age of the first men and their sustenance, stating, “*panis erat primis virides mortalibus herbae, quas tellus nullo sollicitante dabat*”, which comes to mean that “the bread of the first mortals was made of green herbs, which the earth produced unsolicited.” (Ovid 4.395-6). From this remote past, Ovid describes the intervention of Ceres in mortal affairs, the subsequent proliferation of mankind, and ultimately, their descent into depravity due to war and greed. Ovid explains, “*prima Ceres homine ad meliora alimenta vocato mutavit glandes utiliore cibo,*” that “Ceres first improved the nutrition of men by replacing acorns with more substantial food.” (4.201-2). The fact that Ovid opens this passage with ‘*prima*’, and his subsequent listing of the goddess’ gifts to the first men, depict the gods as exceedingly benevolent—a portrayal which differs greatly from the gods in the *Metamorphoses*, wherein Ovid frequently and openly critiques Greco-Roman divinities. Thus, this passage seems to be a confirmation of religion’s positive influences on mankind. Religion becomes a force not only for annular order, but for moral order and the creation of customs and rites. Furthermore, those transgressions and crimes most detrimental to Roman character are laid out in Ovid’s portrayal of a war-ravaged future. By moving freely between time periods, Ovid transgresses boundaries and accentuates the depravity of Roman civil war by placing it alongside a time period of primal, utopian glory.



Ovid again interprets religion as an ordering force and declares, “non est opus indice causae; sponte deae munus promeritumque patet,” that, “the cause for the festival need not be discussed as the merits of Ceres are readily apparent.” (Ovid 4.393-4). Ovid does however consult the reasons for the worship of Ceres, undermining his own point in order to comment upon a potential lack of reverence and awareness in the modern Roman state. This potential disillusionment with the piety and morality of modern Rome is confirmed by the subsequent section of this passage, in which the poet explains, “aes erat in pretio, Chalybeia massa latebat: eheu, perpetuo debuit illa tegi. Pace Ceres laeta est; et vos orate, coloni, perpetuam pacem pacificumque ducem.” (4.405-8). Here, Ovid writes, “copper was valuable and the Chalybeian weight of iron was kept in concealment: Alas, these ores out to have been hidden Forever. Ceres abounds in peace, and you should have pled, o farmers, for perpetual harmony and a pacific leader.” In this section, Ovid rallies directly against the warmongering and greed of contemporary Roman society, and beseeches his ancestors to favor peace and tranquility over wealth and arms. Ovid claims that the farmers ought to have asked for a pacific leader, alluding to the constant strife and war that defines early Roman history. Furthermore, this invokes the concept of a Saturnian golden age – a popular myth under the Augustan regime – which suggests that once, the world enjoyed perfect harmony, untilled, uncorrupted, but that ever since, the quality of the ages has continuously declined.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Ovid again links this corruption and Rome’s archaic past to the Greek world through his use of the Chalybeian people as a metaphor for iron and steel. Perhaps, writing under the burgeoning Augustan regime, which extended the idea of a new golden age under Augustus, Ovid sought to further accentuate Roman supremacy through his depiction of mankind’s corrupted fate overcome. Regardless, Ovid’s

---

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v. “Golden Age”.

*Fasti*, through those stories and traits it celebrates, betrays which virtues, which vices, are most valuable and most deleterious to Rome, respectively.

Those sections of the *Fasti* that I chose to translate cover a wide range of topics from fertility, to food, to death as they exist according to the Roman calendar. Furthermore, I sought to incorporate those portions of each section which most explicitly speak to the transmission of these ideas and customs from Greece, from an ancient, archaicizing past. The *Fasti*, as a poetic testament to the calendar, is strictly concerned with order. This order adopts a number of forms, from the annual ordering of dates and festivals, to the ordering of the sun and the stars as a means of judging temporality. But most fittingly for our purposes, Ovid's *Fasti* addresses the order of human society, and of Roman social order. Whether it be the dates on which it is lawful or unlawful to enact judgment, to pass decrees, or the mere evaluation of traits and virtues, Ovid's *Fasti*, despite its hoary, mythic trappings, maintains a deep concern for the contemporary, Roman behaviors of the poet's time. Ultimately, it is itself a revocation of Augustus' power. By composing the *Fasti*, Ovid demonstrates the poet's power to order the Roman world, and the princeps relative inadequacy.

## **2. The Poetry of Catullus**

In my efforts to translate and write about the poetry of Catullus, I began with poems that articulated details of the social climate the poet was writing in. In these poems, Catullus does not deal with the mythic circumstances of epic poetry. He does not celebrate the virtues of public Roman figures. Rather, the poet discusses dinner parties, and napkin thieves, and infidelity, and romance in the Roman Republic, and through the poet's intensely, often uncomfortably personal tone, we are invited to explore the elite Roman milieu of the final years of the Republic. This poetry marks some of the finest invective ever to be composed. Catullus' appeal comes from his

flagrant verbal attacks, his threats of physical violence, his knack for violating our expectations and grounding Rome in familiar terms of aggression and profanity. Catullus' crassness, and his blunt introspection on the people in his life, has sustained interest in his poetry well into the modern era. Nevertheless, we must also keep in mind that he was writing from a privileged and elite position. While his verse might sound casual—almost conversational—in its willingness to embrace the profane, Catullus' voice is carefully constructed according to the conventions of his literary milieu.

In certain other poems, Catullus does echo the styles of his Greek predecessors, drawing upon Callimachus in particular. For my purposes, I selected poems firmly rooted in day-to-day Roman social life: *carmina* 13, 14, 17, 25, 27, and 101, all of which demonstrate the poet at the peak of his shocking, nigh-conversational tone. These provided a particularly interesting challenge during the translation process, insofar as I had to preserve the voice, the vitriol of many of the poems by updating choice portions of the language to better resonate with modern conceptions of profanity. Undoubtedly, the *cinaedus* of poem 25 meant something different to the Romans who actively read Catullus during his lifetime. Surely, the rites of Salisubsalus resonated more brightly in the republican Roman mind than they do in ours. Regardless, the spirit of these invectives remains, and it was my intent to make the exact language and dimension of Catullus' critique clearer through creative translational choices that would update the profanity without forsaking its Roman roots completely.

I have chosen to work with the poems of Catullus that deal in celebration, merriment, and the violation of social codes tied closely to the festal act. Let us begin with *Carmina* 13, a simple poem written in the form of an invitation to a dinner party being thrown by Catullus. Here, we witness the deconstruction of the (laws and) customs of hospitality in Rome. Furthermore, we get

a clear sense of the sorts of characters and events with which Catullus concerns himself, in the form of dinner guests and revelers, rather than soldiers and generals.

Speaking in the future tense, Catullus promises his friend Fabullus—their closeness articulated by the possessive *mi* before the vocative *Fabule*—that he *will* dine well, so long as he brings the food, the girls, and the witty conversation. Catullus offers up his house, “*apud me*”, but provides little else for his guest, who should by all accounts expect to be indulged at this dinner party for which he is rapidly becoming responsible. Herein lies the joke of the poem—that Catullus is extending to Fabullus an offer of hospitality without any of the actually goods and services required of a proper host. The joking spirit of the poem, and indeed, the general spirit of humor in Catullus and the milieu about which he writes is appropriately evoked when the poet requests that Fabullus bring *sal*, or salt, to the party.<sup>12</sup> This word, which could very literally refer to table salt, given the context of the poem, can also be taken to mean wit; this wit, indeed, seems to be more vital than any amphora of wine or platter of food to the sensibilities of Catullus, who extends to Fabullus, in the form of an invitation, one giant joke.

We can take the humor of the poem to indicate that generosity is valued in Catullus’ Rome, while paucity is frowned upon. Catullus respects the culture of hospitality in Rome, but he violates it through his own poverty. The poet explains, “*nam tui Catulli plenus sacculus est araneorum,*” that “the wallet of your Catullus is full of cobwebs,” (Catullus 13.7-8), suggesting that he cannot fund the festivities. Once more, the closeness of Catullus and Fabullus is established by the possessive adjective *tui* placed before Catullus, suggesting that the poet belongs to Fabullus specifically. Through the closeness of their relationship, Catullus has duped Fabullus into accepting his offer of hospitality—an offer which he cannot sustain on his own—in

---

<sup>12</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v. “Sal”

order to have his meals and entertainment provided. Catullus' ability to manipulate Fabullus' expectations speaks to the greater culture of dining and social life in Rome. In order for Catullus' comedic deceit to succeed, there must be an established culture of social dining and symposia in Rome, and given the clear inversion of Catullus' role as the host, it seems clear to us that the laws of hospitality dictate that the guests should be treated to the generosity of those throwing the party—not the other way around, as it is presented in *Carmina* 13. Catullus transgresses the social customs of his day in order to prey upon the expectations of his fellow Roman citizens.

While this poem is certainly intended as a joke, it also reveals Catullus' curious position within Roman society. Catullus is not wealthy at the moment he composes the poem, yet the expectation that he is a good and generous host suggests that he might once have been. He is extending to Fabullus a hospitality that was previously assumed, and only recently, it seems, has he fallen on hard times. Furthermore, the circuitous reasoning of the poem's narrator portrays the Roman demeanor as one that values honor and personal standing. Catullus must not ask outright for the generosity of his friend. He preserves his own standing by presenting himself as a good host, despite his inadequacies, and only through the veil of wit may he outright request Fabullus' generosity. Thus, Catullus transgresses proper social etiquette by relying on his poetry to subvert expectations and swindle friends.

Furthermore, Catullus carries this joke through to subvert the gender politics and religion of Republican Rome. Even though the poet cannot offer food or wine to his dinner guest, he does promise Fabullus "*quid suavius elagantiusvest,*" "something sweeter or more elegant", in the form of his girlfriend's perfume, which "*donarunt Veneres Cupidinesque,*" "was given to her by Venuses and Cupids" (Catullus 13.10-2). Catullus claims that this perfume smells so sweet that Fabullus will ask the gods to make him into a gigantic nose, rounding out the absurd and

absurdly revealing final moments of the poem. This dense outro speaks to three issues: religion in Rome, the relationship between Catullus and Fabullus, and the conception of gender in Roman social life. In a basic sense, Catullus seems to be mocking the religious practices of his fellow Romans. He treats the gods flippantly, referring to *Veneres Cupidinesque* in the plural, as if they are conceptual and expendable. Rather than fixed, divine beings, Catullus sees the gods as models, personifications of greater social and ethical traits, more akin to tropes or literary figures than actual organisms. Furthermore, the suggestion that Fabullus will ask to be transfigured into a giant nose by the gods is an especially glib depiction of religion. While Catullus' specific treatment of the gods cannot be taken to indicate an overall lack of piety in Republican Rome, it does suggest that religion was not immune from satire. Here, Catullus may in fact be mocking the sorts of concerns that people were wont to bring before the gods. Indeed, the divinities in *Carmina* 13 are responsible for sensual pleasures. They permit Fabullus to attend the dinner party, and donate choice perfumes, transforming the Roman into a physical manifestation of sensory delights. As such, their domain seems less than vital to the moral and civic proliferation of the state. It also speaks to Catullus' station in the upper echelons of Roman society. A poet's career was an elite thing in ancient Rome, and while we are inclined to think of Catullus as a sort of Roman everyman due to his casual tone and personal demeanor, it must be kept in mind that he was writing from a place of privilege and social power. Catullus, even in this impoverished state, is still in a place to confer gifts. These appear both in the form of the perfume, and through his songs, which he readily composes without means.

But Catullus' gift of perfume is also complicated by the fact that it was originally his girlfriends; that he is now giving it to his male friend, Fabullus, and that their relationship has been deepened by the frequent use of possessive pronouns whenever the two men are named.

The dedicatee is not simply *Fabulle* in the vocative, but *mi Fabulle*, “my Fabullus”, and when Catullus references his empty wallet, he is rendered, *tui Catulli*, “your Catullus”. Sexuality is a common topic in the poetry of Catullus, and while it may not be especially present in *Carmina XIII*, the highly erotic gift of perfume from Cupids and Venuses, deities of sensual pleasure and desire, should not be dismissed. The gift is further attached to “Catullus’ girl”, complicating Fabullus’ place as the subsequent recipient. In this instance, the brevity, and the seemingly straightforward nature of Catullus’ poetry reveals layers of complication. By making such offhand comments about a gift of perfume, token of femininity and eroticism, Catullus makes numerous, curious implications about his own sexuality, and about the relationship between him and Fabullus. But he leaves it at that, leaving us to speculate. The simplicity of Catullus’ poem begins to confound us through its refusal to elaborate on these complex issues of gender and sensuality. From a single poem, it is impossible to unravel any greater statement about these issues, but as I will demonstrate moving forward, Catullus’ poems form a dialogue with each other, creating a greater tapestry of Roman transgression through an apparently informal lens.

The themes of courtesy and etiquette that begin to arise in *Carmina* 13 are carried over into 14, which details Catullus’ rejection of a gift during the festival of Saturnalia. This poem is important for its depiction of a central Roman holiday, as well as its portrayal of gift-giving decorum and the hostile literary environment in which Catullus was writing. Catullus describes the Saturnalia, the backdrop of the events of the poem, as *optimo dierum*, the very best of days, yet the poet behaves at his worst. The humor in this poem derives from Catullus’ rudeness, his incredulity at receiving a gift of trashy poetry from a certain Calvus. Just as the poet’s impertinent behavior in poem 13 also revealed the respectable facets of Roman dining etiquette, so too does Catullus’ ungraciousness in 14 inform us of the greater culture of gift giving and

celebration surrounding the winter festival of Saturnalia. If the gods were downplayed in 13, then they are neglected completely in Catullus' depiction of the Saturnalia. Furthermore, this poem provides an insight into the literary climate in which Catullus was writing. Apparently, this practice of assembling and distributing collections of poetry was common among Roman poets, and again, this reveals Catullus' place among an elite, Roman literati.

Despite the fact that the Saturnalia would have been considered a religious holiday, the poet focuses solely on human machinations, and on the external, cultural facets of the celebration, and as such, we gain a greater sense of what the festival would have actually been like, and what it meant on a personal level to the common Roman citizen. For Catullus, it is an excuse for cruelty, and wit, and clever ribbing at the expense of various other rival poets.

This poem offers a number of interesting moments for translational interpretation. Here, Catullus hones in on minute details—the names of specific Roman poets—in his attack on Calvus. In the opening lines, Catullus remarks “*muner isto odissem te odio Vatiniano,*” (Catullus 14.2-3), that he ought to hate Calvus with a *Vatinian* hatred for that gift of his. This reference is uniquely Roman, and while the allusion to a specific, ostensibly hate-filled Roman, Vatinus, is clear, the sense would be lost if it were translated directly into modern English. Nevertheless, because this hatred does refer to a real figure in Catullus' life, and one who appears within the pages of his poetry book, I left the comparison unaltered. While the exact definitions of this rage are left unclear, the social exchanges and rivalries present throughout Catullus' work, and in poem 14 especially, are honored through the preservation of Vatinus' name.

Poem 14 presents other opportunities for unique interpretation insofar as Catullus is speaking to a general climate of artistic competition by naming three very specific poets. The specificity might prove challenging for a modern audience, yet Catullus' vitriolic wit allows his



sense of these men to shine through in spite of a lack of context. In a few succinct lines, Catullus invokes and smears the careers of the poets Caesius, Aquinus, and Suffenus. He also slanders Sulla the grammarian. Despite the specificity of his insults, it remains clear that Catullus is targeting a certain literary climate in general, and through his own, biased perspective, we as moderns are granted a unique insight into the competitive spirit of the Republican literary world of Rome. Catullus swears to repay Calvus' gift of bad poetry thus: "*Caesios, Aquinos, Suffenum, omnia colligam venena,*" by assembling "Caesius, Aquinus, and Suffenus, every poisonous thing." (Catullus 13.7-8). He vows collect an array of venom, condemning this trio of poets as toxic. The metaphor of poisons, and the uniquely literary bent of this poem, once again speaks to Catullus' heightened place within Roman society. Furthermore, he suggests that poetry is capable of inflicting harm. Bad poetry has been identified as toxic, but Catullus' too, pointed and refined, can be as detrimental as any scrap of ill-formed verse. It is interesting that Catullus entertains the ideas of poisons and subtle sabotages, rather than direct violence, which he often threatens his enemies with in other poems. Nevertheless, poem 14 presents a more cautious and conniving Catullus. He is part of an elite that deals in remote invective, writing cruel poetry and delivering poisons rather than dirtying his hands in direct confrontation. One of the greatest instances of wordplay appears in poem 14, when Catullus orders his rivals, "*abite illuc unde malum pedem attulistis, saecli incommoda, and pessimi poetae,*" "to go where a wicked foot carried them, disagreeable ones of the age," whom Catullus brands "the worst of poets" (14.21-2). Catullus combines the abject cruelty of his mocking tone with specific, heightened literary references. He has the privilege and the perspective of a literary elite in Rome, and as such, he is able to combine his base invective with the lofty figures of the Roman literati.

Finally, profanity forms a major component of Catullus' transgressive repertoire, responsible for informing the popular, reductive perception of his poetry as raunchy and unrefined. While profanity is not unique to Catullus' works (as Petronius has already shown), the poet's unique manipulation of expletive as a means to attack his adversaries grants obscenity special status in his poems. These constitute explicit, textual transgressions, which force the reader to confront the impropriety of the poet's words. We become implicated in Catullus' crime the moment our eyes glance over an instance of profanity. The poet's attack is permanently rendered on the page, and the venom behind his transgression persists in-print, indefinitely, like a sickness lingering in the air.

Concerned with the belittlement and intimidation of a suspected napkin thief, Thallus, *Catullus 25* stands out for its violent rhetoric and its salvos of obscenities. This poem provides a blueprint for the invective typical of Catullus, and also poses a unique translational challenge in how to update Roman profanity for a modern readership. *Carmina 25* begins with the address, "cinaede Thalle," or "Thallus, you queer," (Catullus 25.1), employing immediate profanity to taint our perception of Thallus' character. The *cinaedus*, or catamite, refers to the passive male recipient of anal sex in the Greek tradition of pederasty. The vulgarity of this term and its implications of moral debauchery are present in the Latin, but for a modern audience, the label *cinaedus* refers to an obscure, proto-Roman tradition, and the vitriol of the word is lost. Therefore, I elected to substitute the pejorative "queer" in its place, as the term both denotes non-heterosexual coital practices, as well as a sense of otherness. Catullus ostracizes Thallus from Roman society by branding him as a sexual deviant, before further condemning Thallus' indiscretions as a thief. Transgression is present both in behaviors of the subject of the poem, as well as the invective of the poetic voice, but ultimately, Catullus' words outmatch the offense of

the napkin thief. The poet then goes on to violate Thallus' physical person through verbal means. Unlike poem 14, in which Catullus compared bad poetry to poison, and implemented these verses like a subtle assassin, the Catullus of 25 is flagrantly sadistic in the tortures he conjures up for Thallus. Catullus orders that Thallus returns his dinner napkins, lest, "ne laneum latusculum manusque mollicellas inusta turpiter tibi conscribilent flagella, et insolenter aestues, velut minuta magno deprensa navis in mari, vesaniente vento," "scorched whips hideously deface [Thallus'] downy ribs and supple little hands; then [he'll] thrash in an unprecedented fashion, like a raft caught in open waters by the raging wind." (Catullus 25.10-3). Catullus does not physically injure Thallus, but his threats of violence are made physical by their permanent transcription within the tangible artifact of the poetry book. By presenting his attacks in this way, Catullus is able to lead a sustained assault on his rivals, their persons and reputations permanently defaced within his lines of poetry.

Another telling instance of violent invective occurs in poem 16, in which Catullus begins, "Up yours both, and sucks to the pair of you, Queenie Aurelius, Furius the faggot, who dared judge me on the basis of my verses—*they* mayn't be manly: does that make *me* indecent?" (Catullus 16. 1-4).<sup>13</sup> Once more, Catullus inflicts physical violence without ever accosting his rivals. Furthermore, the offense for which Catullus makes these violent remarks is the mistaking of his poetic persona for his actual personality. Catullus transgresses proper social custom both in his deployment of violence and profanity, and also in the sense that he has transgressed his societal role through the adoption of a bolder poetic identity. Ultimately, these obscenities are strategic, textual transgressions that force the reader, and the recipient, to violate the etiquette of language. Catullus' use of profanity against his enemies is not crude, but hyper-refined, if we

---

<sup>13</sup> For this poem, I used Peter Green's 2005 translation of Catullus.

consider that the poet has transformed acts of physical, sexual violence into exceedingly erudite verse.

Catullus utilizes poetry as the ultimate transgressive medium—one that allows him to assault his enemies without consequence, while also committing his aggression to public memory through the proliferation of the poetry book. In poem 13, Catullus uses his poetry in order to deceive his friend, while in poems 14, 17, and 25, the poet displays an increasingly violent temperament. Ultimately, poetry becomes the outlet for this discontent, and by making literary transgressions, Catullus contains his misbehavior neatly within the world of the page. In Catullus' hands, a line of verse can be as deadly as any poison or raging storm.

### **3. Petronius' *Satyricon***

Slaves and former slaves amass in Trimalchio's dinner hall, assembled before lavish foods and displays. The decadent host flitters about the dining room, conducting the spectacle with violence and harsh words. This is the scene of the "*Cena Trimalchionis*" —The Dinner with Trimalchio, contained in sections 71-74 of the surviving *Satyricon* of Petronius. Within these scenes, Encolpius and his friends attend an elaborate meal at the house of the newly wealthy ex-slave Trimalchio, who regales them with all manner of indecencies. His home is a den of extravagance, and the ostentatious events of the evening serve to ultimately condemn the excesses of the Roman elite. Petronius portrays the wealthy elite of Rome behaving badly, depicting their personal transgressions. Furthermore, the author himself transgresses through his attack on the sociopolitical climate of Rome. The misbehavior of the aristocrats during the Trimalchio dinner scene constitutes an instance of Petronius' own condemnation of the excesses

of the Roman elite, and in writing scenes of aristocratic transgression, Petronius transgresses his role of author in order to play the part of the social critic.

The *Satyricon* is firmly situated in a specific Roman milieu—that of the empire under Nero. Therefore, much of Petronius’ language is laced with Latin colloquialisms, offhand references to figures or events that would have been familiar at the time, but ring hollow now. In translating sections of the text, I was forced to update many of these turns of phrase to better reflect the meaning of the prose. Furthermore, Trimalchio’s immensely scathing and insightful view of the world, of the party and those around him, comes across as distinctly modern, not unlike Catullus’ invective. I attempted to reflect this in the language of Trimalchio’s speech. Nevertheless, many of the excesses of the dinner itself are distinctly Roman in nature, and to a certain extent, I had to preserve the characteristics of the time and place in which Petronius was writing.

Trimalchio’s wealth is itself a transgression of Roman social order. An ex-slave, Trimalchio has ascended to the position of the rich elite through dubious means, and his displays of wealth are gaudy and ostentatious. Trimalchio’s relationship with his slaves stands as a contentious issue. Speaking on the topic of his death and his estate, Trimalchio declares, “*Amici... et servi homines sunt et aequae unum lactem biberunt, etiam si illos malus fastus oppressit. Tamen me salvo cito aquam liberam gustabunt. Ad summa, omnes illos in testamento meo manu mitto,*” stating that “friends *and* slaves are people, and they drink equally the same milk, even if ill fortune shall take them by surprise. Nevertheless, if I am healthy, they shall soon taste the water of liberation. To achieve this I am releasing them all from my service in my will.” (Petronius 71). Trimalchio compares the man to the slave, and finds that they are the same. What’s more, upon his death, he will set his slaves free. Soon, they will taste the water of

freedom. Trimalchio elides the class differences at work in Rome. No doubt, he senses this fluidity because of his own passage from the underclass to the Roman nouveau riche. But his spree of pre-mortem generosity is itself a violation of proper custom, insofar as Trimalchio is giving away his wealth before he is dead, and for one very apparent reason: “*ut familia mea iam nunc sic me amet tanquam mortuum,*” so that “his whole family will love him in life as much as they shall when he is dead.” (Petronius 71). Trimalchio is parcelling off his riches in life to earn the love that his family will have for him in death. These disingenuous donations serve no one more than Trimalchio himself. Furthermore, this prompts Trimalchio to bring out his will, which eliciting groans from the slaves<sup>14</sup>. His forced generosity takes a visible toll on the house, causing physical discomfort to those slaves closest to him. Trimalchio’s violation of his slaves is rampant during his section of the *Satyricon*, an abuse all the more problematized by his own position as a former slave.

The following description of Trimalchio’s funeral arrangements struck me as one of the most darkly peculiar moments in any of the Roman literature I have read. Invoking grave humor, and embracing death, Trimalchio violates Roman funeral customs by laying them bare, manipulating them with the power of his wealth. This brought to mind the discussions on Roman epitaphs discussed by Mary Beard during the Anthony Hecht lectures held at Bard College last fall, which alluded to a common practice of placing playful inscriptions on Roman gravestones. Trimalchio’s epitaph, however, seems a bit more dangerous, and represents Roman grave humor taken far beyond its logical conclusion. Overall, I sought to capture the ostentatious grandeur of

---

<sup>14</sup> “Trimalchio, dropping his joking mood, ordered that a copy of his will be brought out, that the whole thing be read aloud from beginning to end, the household groaning.” (Sat. 71)

these moments. Capturing the tone of Trimalchio's lofty goals of the grave was a matter of balancing the decadent with the macabre.

Between descriptions of his tomb, his funerary statue, Trimalchio explains himself, stating, "*Valde enim falsum est vivo quidem domos cultas esse, non curari eas, ubi diutius nobis habitandum est,*" that it is wrong for a man to cultivate the house he lives in while neglecting the tomb which he will inhabit much longer with his ancestors." (Petronius 71). Now, Trimalchio is declaiming to us what is proper, what is wrong, although his notions of correctness seem backwards. Trimalchio's fascination with his own death comes across as grotesque and excessive.

Trimalchio's emphatic language represents both his demanding nature and a play on the typical grave humor of Roman tombstones. He ceaselessly describes greater, more elaborate pieces for his tomb, alluding to the manner in which he will deceive travelers into look upon his grave. Trimalchio states, "*Horologium in medio, ut quisquis horas inspiciet, velit nolit nomen meum legat,*" that "he shall put a sundial on his grave, so that whoever should look for the time is forced to read his name." (Petronius 71). The ex-slave receives recognition, but like his wealth, he has won it through dubious means. The extent of Trimalchio's fantasy speaks to the excesses of Roman social life, the downside of wealth and power. Trimalchio is determined to see his legacy carried over into the next life— so determined in fact, that the myriad, elaborate displays at his feast are mere distractions to him. Furthermore, as a singular, self-made man, Trimalchio displays less interest in the development of familial legacy than he does the establishment of his own cult. Trimalchio's sense of self-importance may indeed be one of his most transgressive and dangerous qualities, insofar as it encourages indulgence and personal

pleasure over restrained, communally beneficial behavior. Even Trimalchio's gestures of wealth serve little other purpose than to ensure the growth of his own reputation.

At the height of his macabre brag, Trimalchio recites the epitaph that will be inscribed on his tomb. Within these lines, transgression of social codes and conventions takes on a novel form as something appealing—vaguely dangerous and enticing—to be embraced and flaunted from the grave. Through the opening lines of the dedication, Trimalchio's full name reveals the sources from which he's amassed his wealth, his renown. The engraving begins, "here lies Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio of Maecenas who was elected to the position of Sevir in his absence." (Sat. 71). The millionaire slave has adopted the nomina of Maecenas, popular patron to the poets Horace and Propertius.<sup>15</sup> He also dons the name of Pompey, who waged war on Caesar. This only adds to the ostentation of Trimalchio's character. He tethers his own wealth to the legacy of other, established Roman figures. Maecenas, in particular, has literary clout in addition to political pull, and by invoking his name, Trimalchio appeals outwardly to the reader to accept him among the pantheon of famous, literary Romans. Trimalchio seems to have totally restructured his life, and his identity, to suit his wealth. Furthermore, he cannot stand to see this turn of fate go unnoticed. Trimalchio must be celebrated in the grandest terms. He must embody, completely, the pressures and excesses of Nero's Rome. His persona is manufactured and transgressive, yet it appeals to all the proper sources and authorities, and as such, cements Trimalchio as an up-and-coming power in the world of the Roman elite.

On a formal level, the insertion of the dedication is startling, feasible only in the novel, which Petronius has adopted as his unique literary mode. In his discourse on the novel, Russian scholar M. M. Bakhtin discusses the novel's capacity for heteroglossia, or a difference of

---

<sup>15</sup> *Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v. "Maecenas, Gaius"



voices.<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin suggests that unlike other literary modes, the novel is able to incorporate aspects, both formal and thematic, from *all* literary modes, and Petronius certainly accomplishes this when he shifts the focus of his prose from Trimalchio's speech to the ex-slave's epitaph inscription.

Here, however, we must look to the prose style of the original Latin, and also consider carefully how to render the text in modern English. Petronius sequesters the epitaph behind the sentence, "*Inscripto quoque vide diligenter si haec satis idonea tibi videtur,*" in which Trimalchio posits, "Likewise the inscription—take a careful look, and tell me if this seems apt enough for you..." (Petronius 71). Trimalchio invokes the literal act of reading by this statement, confusing the literary realms in which the reader is engaging. In effect, this both separates the dedication from the main text, formally elucidating Petronius' literary techniques, and it also transgresses audience expectations of genre and form. We are already reading a book, or hearing a book being read aloud to us, when Trimalchio exhorts us to read again. He is making us hyper-aware of our literary predicament. Furthermore, he is drawing attention to the unique powers of the novel to incorporate numerous literary modes on the fly. This is not only a cultural transgression, but a formal one. I attempted to replicate the effect of Petronius' intertextual epitaph by isolating the grave inscription and placing it in capitals, as it would have appeared on a Roman tomb. We cannot know how Petronius formatted the original Latin text, but this rendering of the epitaph no doubt honors the collusion between different modes of reading at work in this scene.

The remainder of Trimalchio's epitaph consists of even more rejections of Roman social expectations. Following his name, it is said of Trimalchio "*cum posset in omnibus decuriis*

---

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin 2006: 484

*Romae esse tamen noluit,*” “that he could have served on every jury in Rome, yet he refused.” (Petronius 71). Trimalchio’s wealth and his newfound authority have granted him the sociopolitical opportunities of highest Roman society, yet he has refused every offer. Trimalchio’s private, self-made wealth continues to stand in opposition to Roman civic society, evinced clearly in his refusal to accept positions of political responsibility within the city. The unprecedented origins of his wealth are made clear in the following descriptor, “*Pius fortis fidelis ex parvo crevit sestertium reliquit trecenties,*” which states that “pious, stalwart, and true, from little [Trimalchio] arrived at wealth and left 300 sesterces.” (Petronius 71). Despite his servile beginnings, Trimalchio is pious and stalwart and honest—honorable, even. These traits, and in particular the vague virtue of Roman *pietas*, are invaluable to Trimalchio’s time and place, making him an ideal citizen, yet he continues to violate the customs, the expectations of Rome by confining his money, his power, to his own estate. From little, he has arrived at riches, and leaves 300 sesterces in his name upon his death. What might initially appear to be an act of generosity is unequivocally braggadocios. Trimalchio has unduly flaunted his riches in life. Now, through his epitaph inscription, he shall continue to violate the decorum of Rome from beyond the grave, transgressing even the boundaries of death.

Trimalchio’s epitaph concludes with the assertion, “*nec unquam philosophum audivit,*” that “he never heard a single philosopher,” (Petronius 71), before he bids the audience at his grave, “Vale, et tu”. For all the wisdom and character that Trimalchio has paraded around, his dedication claims that he has also made a point to deliberately avoid advice and instruction. Once more, Trimalchio highlights his individualism as a feature surpassing even his glory and wealth, but this individual seems to work against the social customs of Roman society. As an ex-slave who now owns slaves, and who amasses wealth for his own benefit above all else, Trimalchio

transgresses values of civic duty, mercy, and humility. The final words of the epitaph tell the reader of his tombstone goodbye, “and to you”, speaking to both the onlooker at the grave and the interred Trimalchio himself. Just as the introduction to this epitaph subverted our expectations of literary forms, so too does this conclusion redirect our attention to the act of reading. The final lines of Trimalchio’s epitaph invoke the tradition of Roman grave humor, discussed at length by Mary Beard as incorporating a dialogue between the tombstone and the itinerant graveyard wanderer.<sup>17</sup> We are reminded once more that we are reading through a number of literary levels. However, unlike the vague, often playful epitaphs described by Beard, Trimalchio’s is, again, concerned chiefly with himself, and it seeks to parade his achievements in life long after he has died by creating an elaborate monument in his image. Trimalchio’s epitaph has been inserted into the greater text of the *Satyricon*, transgressing literary bounds just as the ex-slave’s demeanor transgresses Roman courtesy, and as his career, as well as his personal wealth, violates the social responsibilities of the empire.

#### **4. Transgression in Conclusion**

Ultimately, each author augments their work through the use of transgression, however the ways in which they achieve this are quite varied. Ovid’s *Fasti* orders the Roman year through the exploration of myth and aetiology, thus forming a base for the customs and mores of Rome. In doing so, Ovid emphasizes the behaviors that are deemed moral and patriotic by the Roman Empire, providing a foundational basis for proper religious practices and rites. That said, Ovid’s frequent inclusion of astral chronology, coupled with the fact that he himself is the one ordering the Roman year, rather than Augustus, reveals a layer of dissent that underpins the poem as a

---

<sup>17</sup> From Beard, North, and Price’s *Roman Religion* Volumes I and II, and the Beard/Hecht lectures at Bard College.

whole. Catullus, on the other hand, uses Roman social function, violence, and profanity, in order to establish familiar situations and social exchanges which he then violates through obscenity. The poet utilizes poetry as a unique transgressive tool, capable of inflicting harm and lasting, physical damage through the publication of formal, physical verse. He further transgresses the bounds between biographical poet and poetic persona, at once condemning his associates for mistaking his poetry for his own opinion, while simultaneously airing real-life grievances in the same verse. Finally, Petronius' *Satyricon* stands out both in its format as a novel, and in its capacity to lampoon the decadence of Roman society under Nero. Petronius utilizes the unique format of prose writing to conflate and compare different forms of written text, and ultimately, challenges Roman conceptions of legacy, ancestral cult, and wealth, as well as self-accountability and civic responsibility.

The conclusions I drew from my translations of these texts are the same insights which inspired my prose work, "The Cacus Cycle". Rooted in the aetiological past of Ovid's *Fasti*, and laden with the profanity and violence of Catullus' invective, I hoped to provide a timeless Roman text that not only retold a popular myth, but reinterpreted it by shifting the perspective to that of the monster, Cacus, in an act of perspectival transgression. Transgression reliably provides these texts with a modern feel, insofar as the transgressions of characters or authors place them outside the typical boundaries of Roman society. As such, these figures are moved incrementally closer to us, who, as modern readers, naturally interact with ancient Roman literature from a removed perspective. Furthermore, each author breaks with the literary tradition of Rome in one way or another, or manages to innovate through their use of transgression. Observing these transgressions as they take place, either in the content or the language of the text itself, can give the sense that one is watching something revolutionary take place. Ovid's subtle,

political protestations speak to a monumental shift in authority at Rome, while Catullus' unbridled invective appears to us like the revelation of a unique, uncensored authorial voice. Petronius' displays of decadence and intertextual experimentation, on the other hand, reveal the growing popularity of other forms of writing in Rome, and demonstrate a development of the cultural trends that began with Augustus, and fell into ruin by Nero's time, due to the very favoring of wealth and conflict forewarned in book 3 of Ovid's *Fasti*. I wanted to reflect this monumentality in my prose piece, focusing specifically on shifting cultural and political powers as a motivator for dissent and transgressive behavior. Furthermore, I found that it was important to engage in an exploration of laws and customs in order to recognize the significance of breaking those customs. In the prose piece to follow, I have condensed my understanding of transgression and Roman culture into a singular retelling of a popular myth—a myth that deals primarily in monstrosity, isolation, violation, and above all else, the transgression of natural order.

### **III.**

#### **Ara Maxima:**

Fiction Inspired by Roman Literature of  
Transgression

# **The Cacus Cycle**

**By**

**Fraiser Kansteiner**

## I.

### Winter, First Cycle

**T**he sun was winking through the clouds like a cataract. Midday. Bleak. Still the first month of the year. Bits and pieces of the waters were patched over with ice—black where it was thin and white where it formed thickest over the marsh. Cold cameos to freeze out the river gods.

I sprung from my cave, digging my nails into the deep loam. The ground was still tinged with frost. It bit me as I leapt and bound across the open earth. Goat hunting. They were on the hills this morning, grazing on one of the lower peaks, too stupid to recall my reign of terror, the punishment I had sown across those woods and pastures. Just two days earlier, I'd eviscerated one of the flock with my wide jaws. Ruptured the she-goat's bladder between my molars, drenching the meat in filthy, uriney blood. Let the salty liquids trickle down my chin. The gore of the she-goat got caught up in my beard, in the ringlets of hair around my bare chest and my oily, engorged stomach. I grew fat with the flesh and blood of the kill, sure that the others could smell her remains steaming off my body. They scattered, bleating, shitting themselves in flight. They clipped the earth with half-moon hooves. I sat back and laughed. Raised a haunch to my teeth, smiling behind the wooly leg of the she-goat. Could they see my grin? Would they even understand it? Heads and horns whipped left and right, recoiled halfway backwards as they ran, but never turned to confront me in full.

But by the second morning after, the goats were on the low peaks again. Picking at the ground, snorting all over the clover and the tart remains of weeds. How quickly they had forgotten. Unwitting familiars of the locus. Victims to the power of place, compelled to my place of power: that black cave on the Aventine.



I marked a choice young kid the moment I stepped out of my cave. Halted mid-stride. It dawned on me to have a bit of fun with him first. I flung my arms in a wide arc. Flames spewed from my nostrils, from the back of my throat, turning my tonsils red-hot like axeheads being worked at the forge. I made terrible sounds. Sounds never before heard and never heard again in those parts, but sounds which that flock would not soon forget. Their dumb pupils quivered with the vibrato of my cries. Vultures, slow and black and heavy, fled from the canopy of the woods as I stomped my feet, beat my chest, cleared my throat of all the spores and monstrous mucous that had been accumulating there since last night's digestion. The goats took off in all different directions. Some disappeared over the hills. Others departed between the trees. Still some, too stricken by fear and idiocy, simply ran back and forth, agonizing over which path of escape was most effective. But I knew the truth. I knew which creature Fate had decreed to be my meal.

'Come forward, little billy goat, towards the cool throat of the cave. Chew the moss there or the bitter growth of the willow tree nearby. Leave behind those hard chestnuts. Quit the clover and the sour weeds that flower through the frost. I have better crops, more sweet-smelling herbs and marjoram than the earth could ever provide, all right here inside my cave. Never again will I, stretched out at ease in the entrance to my lair, glimpse such a choice billy goat as thee, browsing, appearing to hang from the high cliffside. Come to me, little billy goat, and abandon your wild flock, already fleeing. You have no men to tend you. I ate them all up. Devoured their tunics and their shepherd's pipes. Now that was a righteous hunger. You are alone, little billy goat. Sentinel on the hill. Round horns make a poor substitute for the master's crook. Let me be your master now, and you, my flock of one. Until the evening star has risen. By then there will be adequate meat and good and fatty headcheese. Smoke will rise from distant chimneys and the

shadows of the hills will lengthen as they fall. Wolves are coming, little billy goat, but you are mine.'

The whole world was an arsenal poised to suit my terrible endeavors, trees and boulders my weapons in those parts. I wedged my claws beneath a gnarled stump and plucked it from the earth. Worms stretched, snapped in half as dirt and pebbles fell from the rotted, twisting roots of the dead tree. Holding it with both hands, I swung the stump around once, twice. On the third revolution, I let loose the mass and sent it careening through the air towards the desperate billy goat. It struck the creature in the hindquarters. The sound of its severed spine echoed through the treetops, scattering whatever vultures or vermin were left. The goat bleated, craned its neck heavenwards. No use asking the gods for help. No help to be found on high. The Olympians would be happier roasting a fat goat's guts over a pyre, and I would make no offering to them.

I dragged the goat back to my lair. Rejoiced as the cool black breath of the cave kissed me on the face. The animal's hooves scratched the limestone floors, making tracks in the straw, the dirt that had amassed there. From the moment I'd arrived on the Aventine, I'd dwelled in that cave. My lair by right. Tunnel to tunnel, I patrolled its bone-bleached walls. Femurs lined the walls. Femurs fitted with wilting candles formed from backfat. I stoked those candles on my trek to the portal proper. Skulls and ribcages hung fixed across the doorframe, three faces of three old fathers laid bare by time and rodent's teeth. I nailed them to the post and lintel in a special triumvirate. Addressed the heads as I came lurking in, dragging the paralyzed goat behind me. Hello to Lucius, swinging on the left, and to Brutus on the right, and in the center of it all, sweet, toothy Cassius with his wide grin, his rotted bicuspid cobwebbed with venom. I touched their faces as I walked under the doorframe. Bent my head to greet theirs and tapped their eye sockets with my yellow claws.

Cassius was my favorite. He had been a choice Arcadian with an ivy-clad staff and robes of sleek purple. I caught him sneaking through the woods in the evening time, trying in vain to convene with nymphs. He met my jaws instead. Met the boulder I launched. I did not like that man. Did not spare him. I reviled his shaggy white beard and found his thesis to be lacking. I caught the last of his breaths as they rose from his bubbling throat. They tasted like wine, roasted meat. I ate him raw. Polished his bones and used them to build the frame for my lair. Then I boiled his head in a cauldron of fat and saltwater. His skull came out shining and clean. I held it in my palm, gazed deep into the black gulfs where the eyes had been, tracing my nails across the scars where the gods had sutured the plates of his skull together. Something of the original chaos remained in that head, fused together from broken pieces.

I caressed Cassius for a long while. Then I carried the goat through the caverns of my lair. The hooves and horns, now limp with death, scraped against what detritus my meals had left on the floor. I lit a brazier with my breath. Shapes of blood jumped to life across the walls. Savage cave paintings that catalogued past meals. The dead eyes of the goat winked in the firelight, two pus-polished marbles.

Many cycles ago, when I had first glimpsed the eyes of some wandering goat, there were no men to shear it, no toga-clad boys to conduct it with reedy tunes. I gazed into its grave plot pupils, beast to beast. Fresh from the chaos. We both knew the rules. Devourer and victim, predator and prey. But then something shifted in that rectangular gaze. Recognition of the natural order. Vanished was my animal sympathy. I became lord, and although the goat's bowels were taught with fear, it obeyed me, stock still. I killed it on the spot and crowned my body with the dripping skins. From that day forth, I wore pelts around my loins, wreaths of hooves and horns,

displaying mastery over the land. That was my first taste of flavors sweeter than blind predation—the day I clothed myself and lifted my head above the mouths of beasts.

But currently my prey was glaring bright, sockets wide, disrupting the pall of my cave, so I stretched the goat's rough flanks with my claws, stomped on its guts and its bones with my unclothed feet. I did this until my toes were full of splinters. I howled in agony, rolled backwards with fatigue. Then, reclining on my elbow, I undressed the cadaver with gnashing teeth. Left the bones bare and punctured where I'd snapped them open to suck the juices through.

That afternoon, I saw something funny while I was dozing in my cave. I was picking my teeth with a fragment of rib when the sound of men came wafting in through the mouth of my lair. I crawled towards the edge of the cave on all fours. Out on the low hill, two shepherds were examining the dried blood of the goat. They spoke in the language of Evander's men—not the rough Etruscan which I could string together in a number of terrifying sentences. Their tunics were obscured by woolen cloaks, and they poked at the gory ground with their knotted shepherd's crooks. Filthy shepherds. I'd seen their kind a thousand times before, low-down in the dirt with their flock, their cocks defiled with the smut of the creatures they reared. One of them was blowing on a small pipe. The other played a song on a reed of grass. Were they searching for the goat now roiling around in my guts? I laughed at the prospect. A low, rolling laugh like the thunder of a shattering bones. They looked in my direction, but did not notice the mouth of my cave. Roots and limbs obscured the entrance—the entrance sunken low into the ground. Few men, if ever they could discover my cave, would dare poke their heads into that reeking mouth of hell. I watched with yellow eyes from the dark. To kill them or not? I posed the question to the subterranean dark. My stomach still protruded with the recent meal. It would not

be a matter of survival, but one of principle, if I should eviscerate those shepherds poking dumbly around my domain. No, I thought. I'd heard the rumors since, of shepherds fucking their sheep; lying beside their flocks under the moonlight; cavorting with insects and dung heaps in their ill-formed dreams. I had standards, Ogre that I was. These men were rustic folk. They lived their lives outside the city walls, and slept beneath the stars. Their quilts were the dirt—sod and lurching worms. I did not wish to defile my jaws with their sordid flesh. So I let them be. Let them poke around as they were, culling dumbly over the hilly expanse. No use, I thought. Those goats were long-gone. One was still present, I conceded, but transformed, mutated into a ghastly jelly bubbling fierce in my stomach. I'd eaten shepherds before and I'd do it again, but in that moment, my bowels were in an uproar, and the glint of their sweat-stained skulls made me want to wretch.

I'd been called a maneater before and it was never I title that I sought to disown. I took pride in the original message. Relished the grim descriptions men by firelight would yield. Nightmares divided me from the trembling populace, made up the pillars of my throne. The earliest settlers in these parts—the earliest human settlers, that is—called themselves Etruscan and regarded my cave as a place of black superstition. They piled skins and polished bones outside my doorstep, compelled by fear. Sweet, syrupy dread of mortal flesh. How I longed to rekindle that bundle of incense, to recapture the taste of panic in the corners of my mouth and lick the air as I ran, ripping and roaring across the wide paths. Men still feared me, of course. Feared me and fled from my shape, hill to hill, and all throughout the darkened woods. But it was an antagonistic fear. The Arcadians were the most recent race to congregate on these Italic shores. They came in flight outriding some tremendous conflict. I'd had my share of confrontations with them, and with their king in particular. He was a cantankerous son-of-a-bitch

named Evander. His mother doubly bad. A prophetess. They had all sorts of big ideas and sharp bronzes to back them up. We'd clashed in the forests. I'd loosed molten rocks against them in the mountain heights. No doubt Evander had sent these two shepherd dolts out into my fields. He was always testing me like that. Always seeing how far he could push me. He was prodding me remotely now, controlling these two shepherds and their crooks with his backwards monarch's will, conveying them closer and closer like errant lambs towards the lion's den. And suddenly, the idea of incinerating these two in a demonstrative fireball seemed all the less unlikely. My gizzard flames had not been stoked in ages, but the whittled shape of these two bumpkins was inspiring something fierce in my godlike loins. And amid the clarity of my rage, the reeds of the shepherds honked obscenely through my cavernous halls.

Dread voices flitted through the darkness. Penetrated the byways of the cave, mixing with the music intolerable. Words rendered themselves in fire against the black canvas:

'Do your dreams declaim to you in the second person? Does Hermes carry messages to you on night's translucent wings? Sleep easy, cruel Cacus. Oh, Ogre on the Aventine. Your time has come. Time to rise from the ashes of your cave-dark slumber. Scylla and Charybdis beckon. A reckoning between gods and men, borne on black-beakered ships. Toss your sleeping roll aside. Clad your flanks in some smutted smock. Wipe the grease from your brow and scrape your teeth with your nails, you beastly thing. It's your time to shine. Sleek Olympus is waiting. Be like the fox and take the fat fowl in your jaws.'

And just like that, they sealed their fates.

The shepherd with the reed, an older man, produced a disc of taugt leather. He beat on the face of the drum with a padded mallet, releasing a dull, thumping noise over the hills, which carried all the way to the back of my cave. The queer music filled my lair, swarmed around me

like buzzing flies. It stuffed my ears, my eyes, my mouth, flooding my brain like wretched sirens' songs. The insides of my cave and the outer world ceased to be distinct. My lair converged upon the hills. The hills converged upon my lair. All was one in the chaos of reeds. The shepherd's trespassed against me, and I against them, disrupting their song with a crimson pall.

The older shepherd tasted like iron and ash. The flavors of his young companion were less developed. I only feasted on their bodies a little before I tossed them, limbs, tunics, and all, into my boiling cauldron. I set a low fire, breaking bits of wood and bone and straw which I set alight with a defiant snort. Their remains congealed into a pungent stew. From the floor of my cave I found a hoplite's shield. I set it over the mouth of the pot like a lid. Let the shepherds simmer while I considered what to do with them.

Dusk enveloped the Aventine as I consulted the trio of skulls.

"Should I add to your ranks?" I asked the fathers.

"No," said Lucius.

"No," rattled Brutus.

But Cassius was silent, and without his counsel, I could not make the call. Vapors rose from the cauldron, coated the walls of my cave with a foul, oily smell. The shadows seemed to glisten with precipitated fat. The youngest shepherd had carried a leather bladder on his belt. It was plugged with a piece of cork and bound with a leather cord. I opened the bladder, revealing the thick, reddish liquid within. I brought it to my lips, lapped up the bittersweet taste with my tongue. It felt warm inside of me. I could feel the liquid charting a course through my entrails. Then, I brought it to the teeth of the skulls. They took the proffered drink in their phantom throats, let it dribble down bright red from their open jaws like the blood they had spilled ages

ago. But Cassius kept his teeth clenched. Offered no guidance. So I downed the rest of the red sludge, and soon, sleep overtook me. All evening, I rolled about the floor of my cave, upset by wild dreams.

Evander's men came after me in the night, raising their bronze in time with the rhythm of horse hooves. They came at me with spears, broadswords, sickles. I heard them before I saw them, and saw them long before they saw me, specters of their torchlight dancing brightly through the trees.

'Terror of the Aventine' they called me. Half breed, or ogre, or bane of the flocks, as though I had not inherited these lands long before the Arcadian rabble. 'Bad One' they'd said, putting it plainly. They were not born here. They did not lay claim to the caves, to the low hills and the dark places in the dawn after the first chaos. Their fathers were not gods with igneous gullets like mine. These Aventine Woods belonged to men in name alone. Before the Arcadians arrived, pimping their symbols and alphabets and fancy sandals, this place had no proper title. Wilderness vast and primordial. Wilderness indebted to the ancient race. The Arcadians seized these woods and pastures with their place names, with their rope-and-timber walls, but this forest never did belong to them. It did not belong to them when I roamed its wide, loamy paths unmarred. It did not belong to them now. I butchered their goats and mothers to remind them of the fact. They would not own it when they died. And when they were fertilizing the soil with their blood and bones, the world would know once more that this forest was mine. It had always belonged to me. From the mouth of my lair to the far horizon, the Aventine Woods were mine to terrorize. Mine alone.

It was true what Evander's men said about me, that I was borne out of the mists of time on my father's shoulders, and that my father was Mulciber, although the Arcadians called him by another name. Mulciber, archduke of fire, patriarch of black smoke and sulphur-belching



hilltops. My nursery rhymes were the sounds of titans feuding. Bones cracking, muscles buckling. I came of age in a world without men and once the earth was splayed out before my father's house he threw me down to the Aventine, esophagus full of flame. 'Tend this', he told me, hammering away at his forge. He had plans for the place. Big plans. A house of war across the whole seven hills. This was before the humans arrived, of course. He visited less and less after that.

Now the Arcadians were at my domain, torchlight blushing against their grave intentions.

"Cacus," shouted Evander, summoning me up from my lair. My head was still swimming with the red liquid from the shepherd's bladder. He spoke in Etruscan for my benefit. Spoke with a low, eastern twang. I shook the blanket of bones and filth from my body, crept to the mouth of the cave. I held the skull of a great bull in my hand, ready to fly at a moment's notice. "Show yourself, you beast," he cried. I laughed. I struck the walls of my cave with bits of metal, with discarded shields and broken swords and spits of bone and flesh half-neglected. Was the Arcadian looking for a fight? He would not win. Could not win. I hurled clots of earth, bits of carcass from my lair to reveal this sacred truth. His men put up their shields or swatted around their faces as the deluge of projectiles rained down upon them.

But Evander had not come to wage war on me. I watched him approach my lair, flanked by guards. Their spears were raised, no doubt, yet they were not poised to strike me. Behind the Arcadian king was a train of goats. Well-shorn, fearfully bleating.

"Take this offering and leave us be," said Evander. He waved his hand. Rings of gold glistened where the moonlight struck them. A young shepherd girl, pigtailed, came running up from the ranks. She urged the goats into my cave, and soon, a mass of coarse-haired bodies were pushing past me in the dark. Evander spoke again. "Take these creatures and stop doing harm to

our shepherds. Please. We hold your father in the highest regard. Now, feast upon them, or better yet, breed them. Then you will not go hungry anymore. We give you this gift that you might respect our walls and our men.”

There was silence after that. Dim crackle of pine torches. Light shuffling of arms. The goats were bleating and my throat was rumbling. I belched out smoke, hissing curses, and Evander’s men retreated. The Arcadian’s gift nibbled at the straw on the floor of my cave. I looked at them in the unwitting dark, chewing the cud of their slaughtered kin. My head was still spinning with the liquor from the shepherd’s bladder. Sleep was overtaking me again. I could still detect the crunching of Evander’s sandals on the frost-ridden grass on the hills beyond. So be it. I let them go. Corralled my newfound flock. That night, I nuzzled up against the goats, too full to feast. In the morning, I would consult the skulls of the fathers. Until then, I dreamt as the shepherds dream.

\*\*\*

**M**ore gifts of goats were brought before me after that night. My crimes were answered with offerings, and soon I became a god in my wretched cave. Seasons passed as the planet revolved. The year was getting on. Winter yielded to spring. Spring to summer. Soon it was autumn and winter would be upon the face of the world once more. I feasted when I felt the urge, or bred the beasts like Evander had advised, letting them roam and fuck along the hills and woods of my domain. When their numbers became too scarce, I needed only to savage the walls of Arcady, or snap the spines of a few Etruscan stragglers to bring Evander and his men back to the mouth of my cave. There, he led a few ill-fated attacks. On those rare occasions when he brought his arms against me, I brought the full wrath of my fires against him—turned his men to ash, reduced mortal bodies to bloody mounds of warped bronze and shredded battle standards. I

sent helmets, cuirasses flying, leftover bones rattling within the metal chambers. Soon enough, Evander learned, and thereafter the only missions the Arcadians made to my cave were ones of peace-offering. I built up a healthy flock. Among the spoils in my lair, I found the drum that the old shepherd had relinquished to me in death. Using my knuckles, discarded femurs, whatever I could find, I beat out dark rhythms on the leather skin. I trained the flock to respond to the dull percussion. By summer, I could summon the whole of the herd into and out of my lair with a single, lowing procession of drumbeats.

Yes, I was the god of that wretched place. Master of flocks. Rattler of the earth like grim Poseidon himself. One night, I tried to consume the morbid ambrosia of the gods—that honeyed smoke that men offer up from bonfires of entrails and thighbones wrapped in fat. I erected an altar of filthy bones. Decorated it with the bronze of dead soldiers. It glistened like a pirate’s grin in the low light of the cave.

I selected a goat whom I did not much care for. I had named him Arruns, after an Etruscan soldiers who Evander mourned loudly in the wake of one of our springtime bloodbaths. He was not poor in size or demeanor. On the contrary, Arruns was a large goat with a protective temperament that could have made him a good billy goat one day. The only problem was he fancied the other rams more than the nannies. There was no child rearing potential there. Not to mention that he kept distracting the other males with his ceaseless mounting and bucking. His spirit was commendable. I’d give him that. But I had to put him down, the strange little bastard.

I sprinkled his head with spelt and sacred oils. Tossed barley and poured water over his head so that he nodded, assenting to the rite. Humming low, I stunned him with a rock. Then I slit his throat with a shard of flint stashed away in the barley. Beneath the goat there was a saucer. A wide-brimmed farmer’s hat, in actual fact, but made of tough leather so that none of

the blood could leak through. Carefully, I directed the wound towards the bowl of the hat. None could spill. None could soak the floor of the cave. Not a drop or else a fury would be upon my house. Drained enough, Arruns' knees buckled and his coarse body gave out in my hands. Flank and limbs collapsed. Blood stagnated in the blessed receptacle. I sung a hymn to myself and pitched the body of the goat onto the smoldering flame. Although the victuals burst and the animal fat sparked brilliantly, I did not enjoy the offering of sacred smoke. It polluted my throat and dulled my own monstrous fires and I never consumed an animal except through snarl of teeth and blood-wetted flesh after that evening.

An entire year went by. Evander added to these gifts precious bowls, tripods, and casks of thick, red wine, which I had first tasted from the bladder of the shepherds. All through the dark of my cave I arranged these treasures, constellations of silvery wealth, which came to decorate my halls. For the past four seasons I had ruled the Aventine as lord and master, placated by Evander and his Arcadians. For four whole seasons I had feasted and roamed the hills with my flock, patrolled the woods and marked my borders with the crumpled helmets of felled men. At last, when the sun had sunk to its lowest point, I retreated into my cave. Exhausted. Nestled against my flock, I bid goodnight to the skulls of the fathers. Winter had set-in once more, and I was gathering my bones, blue with frost, to sleep off the cold. Goodnight Lucius. Goodnight Brutus. Dream sweet, toothy Cassius. And I was gone, deep, deep in hibernation, until next-year's thaw.

## II. Winter, Second Cycle

**E**vander's men were conducting one of their awful festivals on the hill. It was the new year. Winter had not quite faded from the face of the earth. I'd slept through the start of it but the freeze was still thick on the ground when I came to in my cave. The Aventine was brittle and cold, yet the Arcadians danced. They sang, shouted, drunker than me on the strong, red nectar, which they consumed like gods staring down the end of days.

I hated these festivals of theirs. Always had. The Etruscans had been a much more sober people, more concerned with the arts of the grave than with streamers and drink and dance. Every other day, it seemed, the Arcadians were concocting some new reason to bring their brimming bowls out into the fields, out into my fields, to shout the names of their imported gods. How I hated those festivals. Always for some other divinity with golden laurels, high-cinched tunics, gold-embossed cars and teams of resplendent horses. Impractical gods. No two ways about it. I'd show them something to celebrate if only they'd let me stoke their furnaces, meld their forges into proper shapes for producing irons, bronzes, Capitoline wolves. The Etruscans had seen me as such. They'd regarded me as a god, as the fierce mountain deity of the Aventine, which I should have been by right. But I had been introduced to Evander as a monster, and it was only with time, and with the cumulative evidence of my claws' sharp prowess that that Greek off-loader finally came around to the glory of my cult. We were on goods terms now, only I had my doubts about the longevity of our peace. Even then, as Evander's men stomped dithyrambs across my hills, I sensed defiance in their soles. Were they drumming me up from the heart of my cave? Who would dare to commit such a magnificent crime? They were testing me.

As my dreams diminished, visions of terror welled up. Visions that pressed on the backs of my eyelids; bright, chiding lights. I saw terrible, wonderful shapes carved into the rivulets of man's marbled flesh. But I was too sick with sleep. Could not rouse myself from the blanket of bones. Did not see the point in drawing myself up so early in the season. The last month of the previous year had only just gone into remission. There was time for slumber yet. So I lured some stragglers to the mouth of my cave. I growled and hummed and teased their wine-purpled minds. I killed them swiftly and stuffed my ears with fistfuls of plump, Arcadian flesh. Winter could wait. I'd stoke my fires in a week or two.

But something sour was creeping in the air that year. I sensed it when I rose up once and for all from my hibernation, emerging in those final days of the first wintry month. Evander's mother, regarded by the men as a sort of prophetess, had been filling the Arcadians' heads full of nonsense about some reckoning brewing. Something big and bold rolling in from Greece. That's what she said. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, even after I coaxed it out of the victim's mouth.

It had come to pass that I was awoken by a detachment of soldiers wandering near my domain. The ice was still firm on the ends of the branches, the alder trees devoid of leaves like all the trees except those lined with thick, nettled fur. I'd been dozing for two or three months. Last I'd heard, Evander's men were stomping all over the hills, throwing guts onto likenesses of their gods. I had shut them out at only a minor cost to the Arcadian ranks. Signs of my mercy still stained the mouth of the cave. Bits of jawbone, a plectrum of rib meat across a hollowed-out torso. Rats and vultures had been scavenging in my off-time. No concern of mine. That meat was not for eating. Not when I tore it down, at least. But now I was feeling hungry, and mutton was not going to cut it. My goats wandered sleepily to-and-fro. I'd let them wander as they wished

during my hibernation, and they seemed to have gotten along just fine without me. The flock was thinner than before. There was no denying that. But the hardiest of the rams still bucked and clashed horns, and the ewes among them looked ripe and eager for the child-bearing spring. They'd fill out in the months to come. No, it was man that I was craving in the aftermath of so many boreal dreams. I was lonely. I lacked companionship. And it was my stomach that demanded the company of men most of all.

Just my luck then that a contingent of Arcadian hoplites were squatting nearby, camped nearby over a volley of slopes and rocks. They were trying to get a fire going. It looked like they had snared a rabbit. Fools. Fiddling with flint and tinder. Two among them had grown unruly. They were arguing about something that the prophetess had said. My ears turned up, conducting me to the edge of my lair where the curious sounds converged. My stomach growled, yet I silenced it best I could and listened.

Apparently Carmenta had seen something on the night of that new year's festival. She'd been diving around in a pile of organs, rooting out proper truths and the like from the digestive mess. Partitioned off from the party, it seemed, she'd seen the likeness of some face edged with scars, framed by a perfect head of hair. This man was looming near, the Arcadians said. Everyone was getting excited. Carmenta herself had been preparing things back in the high-walled city of the Arcadians. She'd convinced Evander to send these men, and others, presumably, to relieve the countryside of bandits, lions, and wolves. But this particular party had come up empty-handed.

The largest man in the group was complaining that another party had spitted a she-wolf through the womb. A litter of malformed pups had spilled out onto the cold grass. The Arcadians took this to be a major omen. Carmenta was summoned onto the scene. She appraised the

trajectory of the blood on the ground. She measured the size and consistency of the pups who were scattered around the outskirts of their mother's guts. She took auspices from the vultures orbiting overhead. When all was said and done, the party of soldiers were made heroes in the city. Great funeral mounds were erected for them within the city walls, set aside for the times of their deaths. Carmenta ordered that they be decorated with oils and fatty tallow candles. Cypress trees were transplanted around the entrances of the tombs. Cults were established prematurely between the heroes' families, whose names were incised and publicly displayed on washed marbled tablets. Carmenta dictated the epitaphs, and had her son, Evander, solicit the labor and materials. I imagined what these marble slabs must have looked like, and how the men looked while they were carving symbols into them with their hammers and chisels. I imagined it must have looked something like the Arcadian hoplite who was current smashing his flint against a pile of rocks and straw collected from the limits of my cave. Only more refined, perhaps. Surely, Carmenta would not have approved of those brutes cursing on my hilltops. That was their problem. They knew she was displeased, which only coaxed their rage out further.

The soldiers presently outside my cave were hunting for a similar sort of glory. Oh what I'd give them instead. I relished the thought of canonizing these men with talons and claws. Their names would rise towards the heavens, conveyed on dying breaths as their bodies went limp and their shades flitted downwards beneath my lash. Yet I listened still. The large man had been spurred to even greater heights of rage, now cursing Carmenta as some common whore. The others did not take this lightly, and to my great surprise, the men suddenly turned on one another. Before I could get a tooth in edgewise, the Arcadian hoplites were rolling around the earth, claspng each other's throats in their callused hands. And suddenly I found myself in the fray. But I was not out for blood. Not blood proper—blood primed to wet my cracked lips. I was



intervening. I needed to hear that story of Carmenta carried through to its completion. I was transfixed by the thought of this woman behind Evander, whom I had always been dimly aware of, like a specter haunting the corners of my gaze, but whom I had never confronted all-together. Now it seemed, according to these men, that there was hardly an Evander at all. My chief rival was a puppet for this prophetess mother, conducting the rites of men and gods from behind city walls. That she might possess the true Arcadian brain was a prickling possibility. And now there was some other offender looming too. Some Greek fellow, as Carmenta had put it. The dawning of the new year had arrived flanked by all sorts of unsavory possibilities. I could not bear to go on in ignorance. I would comb these mortals' minds for all they were worth, and reap from them whatever I could, no matter the cost. I plucked the offending Arcadian—the man who'd branded Carmenta a whore—out from the crowd, and sent him careening through the air. His bag of bones shattered against a cliff face nearby. Limp, twisted over on itself, the corpse fell with an undignified thud. Four remained. Two scattered, breaking the campfire phalanx they'd formed out of habit. I clamped down on my left nostril and sent a jet of fire streaming from the right. The first Arcadian to flee was brought down in a hail of sparks. Ice melted where the smoldering body fell. I lifted the two who had held their ground, one in each hand, their slick, bronze bodies dangling from the collars of their tunics. With a great crash, I slammed the two together. Bones and bodies hit, converging into a massive, throbbing bruise. I swung them so hard and with such speed that the metal of their cuirasses warped and fused together. That tangle of bodies would never be undone—a thing of pride, that kill. So it came to pass that only one Arcadian remained. He was scrambling now, with all the ambition of a goat but none of the finesse, up the side of a hill. As his sandals slipped and dislodged gravel slopes his pace dulled. I was looming now. Lurking slow. No need to run. No need to exert myself or shed the full sluggishness of sleep just

yet. I was savoring this brief reprieve as a shadow—an ominous, enclosing thing. The snare of my form surrounded him, bearing down blacker than pitch over his shoulders. I hooked my claws through his armor, through his toga, down into his flesh, his muscle. Arcadian howls lined my skull as I picked up the survivor, carried him backwards into my cave. He was shivering when I plopped him down on a pile of bones.

“Go on,” I told him. “Keep telling me what that Carmenta was saying about the man from Greece...”

\*\*\*

**T**he demigod strode in from the North. He had a long beard and a large, tumorous club, which he carried over his right shoulder, opposite the cinched arms of a tawny lion skin. It was obvious he was a hero from the perfumes in his hair, the confidence of his stride and the girth of his triple-knotted club. It was obvious given the glow on the head of cattle in his possession. He held two hundred of the beasts in yoke. They were red and massive like the herd of Geryon, whom I had known in passing as a savage giant and a devourer of men. He had worked with my father at one time. Met me in my youngling days, when I was still spitting fire at lizards on the salt rocks near the edge of the world. Had this man killed Eurytion and the double-headed dog? They were the guardians of Geryon’s herd, assigned to the cattle by divine decree. Their lives were tethered up with those of the bulls. I watched the hero. Watched him settle in the valley between my hills, drinking his fill alongside the cows at one of my crystal streams. I let him be, my muscles tensing with newfound hunger.

The Greek hero’s club was a marvelous tool of destruction. He lay it down on the grass while he drank from the stream, and I watched it, greedily devouring the course of sunlight that reflected off the nails on the hilt, the bronze which crowned the top and wrapped around the girth

of the weapon in wide, spike-set rings. It was not unlike the tree trunks I'd been known to swing, only more refined. The knots had been whittled down to deadly points. Terribly pronounced. The bronze at the top bore spikes of its own, and from where I crouched, sitting in the cool dark of my cave, I could barely make out the gristle and bone of dead hydras, bludgeoned giants. I wondered if I had the tools in my lair to reproduce that club. Bits of bronze—old shields, helmets, bent swords—were plentiful among the debris of my cave. My father was a blacksmith, after all. He'd made weapons for heroes and instruments sharp enough to slay the gods. He'd designed prisons for titans—adamantine panopticons whirling around inside the planet's core. How hard could it be? At once I located a bit of chalk from the floor near my cot. Across the walls, scrawled faintly through a darkness impenetrable to all but me, schematics emerged. Grim designs for machines of war.

At the center of it all, between chariots and mechanical owls, I scratched out the contours of a terrible aegis. Not some tasteless gorgon like that bulwark of Jupiter's daughter. I'd seen that thing once hanging on a hook above my father's forge. Some flesh eating giant named Pallas had crumpled the damn thing with a single fist. Pallas had lorded over some remote island for years at that time. He'd come to the anvil of the hobbled god for a cleaver once. Said men's' backs were too getting too sturdy for an old giant like himself, so he needed something razor sharp to hack through the tough bits. Father made that cannibal the trickiest, nastiest cleaver any butcher could ask for. Not that it served him well for long. Minerva snapped his neck the minute he bruised her shield. Ripped his skin right off his body too. They say she used her teeth, she was so full of rage. Turns out that was the same day that the olive tree came into being. But my aegis would petrify creatures more terrible than the gods themselves.

At the aegis' center was a spiraling Charybdis. Ocean vast and cruel. In the middle of cyclone, a single ship was struggling. It appeared to spin around the vortex, appeared to crash against the rocks and the briney cliffs hurtling in and out of view on its dizzying descent to hell. Minutely rendered on the deck of the boat was a man. Alone. He was collapsed on his knees, his chest and stomach prostrated while he bent his arms uncomfortably towards the gods. But no god answered. Neptune was far below, torturing water nymphs with his trident. Jupiter was flittering about somewhere far-off in the clouds—making love as an eagle, perhaps, or chucking thunderbolts from his throne. Or perhaps he was socializing in Ethiopia with a fake, black beard. He was doing it all at the same time, all at once as echoes of time and man's twisted perception of the gods crossed the upper limits of the aegis. And man was alone. Alone except for the toothy monsters circling his ship. Their eyes surfaced dread yellow out of the current.

Then, a human stench caught on the crossbreeze. Pulled away from my designs, I scurried back to the front of my cave to see what the hero had wrought. Evander and his men had arrived, crouching low on the hillside like billy goats. Their spikes and spears were plunged hard into the earth, held-fast like so many hooks, carrying them to the cliff where they spied on the Greek. This was the moment they'd been waiting for. The moment Carmenta had foretold. I could sense the excitement lingering on their breath, solidified in the cold air beyond their helmets. Did they even see my cave, belching blackness? Did they smell the rot of bones? Hear the squawk of the magpies alighting on ribs and twisted vertebrae? The hills were quiet except for the trickle of the stream. The hero was still lapping there. Dog-like. His cattle grazed and gulped beside him. A nimbus of dust concealed them partways. Sunlight leapt across the crests of the Arcadian's helmets. They were moving now, creeping in low, broadswords drawn, except for a few in the back. Four men in horsehair helmets were carrying a brimming silver bowl. One

of the bowls they'd gifted to me in the past. I'd returned it in the autumn, hurling it like a discus from the top of a great hill. The bowl destroyed a line of Arcadian bulwarks, sent steel and splinters high into the air, scratched the eye of Olympus. Several men died among the wreckage. The crackle of flames coupled beautifully with the sounds of drowning—men choked out by their own collapsing lungs. But now, they were carrying the bowl towards this hero-come-lately. This fucking greenhorn.

There was a moment of apprehension. The hero cocked his head to the left, quitting the stream he was drinking from as the sound of the Arcadians became too loud to ignore. He lay a hand upon the hilt of that mighty club. I could hear the muscles of the Arcadians tighten at the thought of that thing. No mix of talons, no flaming breath or gnash of claws could match that weapon so wickedly designed. I had to admit that, even from my distant outlook at the mouth of my cave. Each bronze knot, each length of gore-soaked wood was a promise of unnegotiable violence—the sort of force that leaves a person in fragments, incapable of recalling anything before or after the brunt of the club fractured the world into so many red-glistening bits. But then, all of a sudden, laughter in the camp. What was this I was hearing? What was I seeing? It all looked like some putrid Satyr-farce. Evander was on his knee, no easy task for a man of his age, pinching the chin of that newcomer from Greece. Evander had deferred to the hero, and was bowing again and again like a cupbearer before the backhand of his lord.

While the Arcadians were distracted in supplication, I mounted a nearby crag, drawing closer under veil of dark terrain. Now Evander and the man were joking, clasping forearms. Evander had risen up from the ground, and now the two were celebrating on even terms. They dipped big tankards into the bowl of sweet wine. Unequivocally Greek. Wrought despicably on their purple-puckered lips. Evander and the man drank many cups, while the soldiers reclined on

the grassy fields. Cold still, but bright on that day. January had yet to end, but the sun was bearing down like summer was in full-effect. The sunlight upset my boils, the barnacles solidified across my shoulder blades out of the cave-dark. I sank low into the rock to quench my howls.

By evening time, they'd slaughtered a third of the head of cattle. Roasting victuals wafted across the hills. Hecatombs were not much different than this. More gold perhaps, more chanting priests with heads uncovered, but the spirit and scope were the same. My goats clung to the seasoned earth, their square eyes engorged on the ambrosia that soaked the crop. I summoned them into my cave with the drum, afraid of what this man might do to them. The Arcadian festivities had mounted to such a volume that I was able call in the goats undetected. Not that I was afraid. Not that I might not make my presence known that very moment, lusting after the look of surprise on Evander's face if I were to pluck that hero's lungs clear from his chest with a crooked claw. But there was a proper time to slaughter. My bowels were in an uproar. Sweat had collected under my armpits and beneath the coarse tufts of hair near my temples. I had to see what this man was made of first. How much man he truly was. The best thing to do was to hang low.

First things first, Evander called the best athletes in Arcadia to present themselves on the hills. I'd seen these men once or twice before, practicing out in the open, but ever since I pinned that javelin thrower to a high alder trunk with his own spear, two summers ago, they'd retreated into the protected gymnasiums of the city. What occasion was this to parade these ripple-bodied freaks in front of my cave? Did the Greek have an appetite for these oiled-up men? When I'd chucked that first athlete against the tree, the impact of the trunk against his skull put him in a deep concussion. Still, he had not died, so his friends were forced to retrieve his body from the

branches. I watched them draw lots out of a pissing urn to go up after him. Some poor, squat fellow with a pig's face drew the ill stone. Clasp the bark between his knees he inched up the tree until he could tickle the feet of the athlete. All this time I'd been watching from an outcropping of rock in the distance, laughing my ass off. I could have killed the lot of them. Still could at any moment. But this tragic play was so much better. A true test of human resilience. Both the piggy rescuer and the athlete fell from the highest branches. Legs broke, got mangled up together. All the remaining athletes had to parse the snarl of bone. I almost shit myself, rolling around, great guffaws welling up in my breast.

But the athletes present were another breed entirely. They wore decorative armors assembled from across the provinces. Some wielded spears and nets, rolled around the grass in sandals and leather shorts, their faces concealed with visored helmets. Others had great bands of gold on their arms and waved short swords. They parried and riposted with bucklers strapped to their off-hands. Grand battles were waged upon the hills for the hero's benefit. Then came archers and axe throwers. Runners and wrestlers. Finally, someone produced a stone discus. A great antique that stank so badly of moss it glowed green.

The sun crept across the hills, out of sight. Evander's party had not budged since morning, and now they were all in a rut drinking. The king was requesting many things from the city to be brought out. At first I thought he might be showing the hero how to sacrifice to me at my cave. But they did not bring the treasures closer, and for every cart upon cart of irons, of purple wools and sweet dried figs that clamored across my field of vision, the men stopped short, plopped down in the vicinity of the river where the slurping cattle lowed, and unloaded my oblations at a distance. They were within my domain—Evander, his Arcadians, and this hero swine—but sequestered by the river, running rampant and permafrosted across the valley basin.

All that stretched across the blackness of the Aventine, all the alders, the sloping hills and deep, treacherous caves, belonged to me. My father installed me as the hegemon in that place, announced my dominion with fiery inauguration. He ran the forges of the gods, his arts unfamiliar to humans, as humans were at that point uninvented. He placed me in charge of his wild hills, his forests, his grottoes. Everywhere except the waterways.

Boundaries were eternal and ought to be respected. Gods especially ought to honor the divisions of old. Borders were man-made things, worth a trifle, or something akin to the shit on my left hand. Boundaries were boulders and valleys and waters and caves. They were put in place the day the poles of the earth took shape and the land surfaced distinct from the waters. Headstones of chaos vanquished. Disorder put down. Rivers no doubt made some of the most cantankerous boundaries of all, and mine was a bitch of a river indeed. Tiberius ruled the waterways that wound through my hills, ruled them as he always had in that place, and although his arts were mild, his father was Oceanus, and he was the favorite son of that old god of the sea. He did not like getting fucked. That, I could respect. Evander and his men were on Tiberius' banks. On land. On land but not in the forests, not on pastures proper or the initial run of the hills. Tiberius' problem, I thought. Until they moved or worse. Then I'd come crashing through the soup with jaws agape. No telling what I'd do or who I wouldn't pluck to bloody the river with man's gushing life unleashed.

But it looked like Evander's men were heaping my offerings around the hero's feet. Greek dandy, sandal-clad. I'd roamed so hard, so far and wide for such a despicable number of years that my feet had grown harder, coarser than the very caves from which I ruled. This fruit was no better than the cows he was goading, yoked in leather just the same. What an un-fucking-holy disgrace. The god of fire and flocks exiled to the caverns of his own dread house. Spurned



by his Arcadian subjects. Who was this lout? This snake-oil peddler? Who had come knocking about in my hills, corrupting my men with his warrior's posture and his club and his tonsured hero's hair? They'd pay for this. Soon, absolution would come raining down. But first, I wanted to catalogue the depths of the Arcadians' depravities, the full-extent of their crimes.

Slaves ran around lighting torches and braziers carried out from the town. Even the soldiers held tankards now, and everyone, including the servants, dipped into the wine when their cups had drained. One of Evander's awful festivals was festering in the hero's camp. Old men arrived chirping lyre tunes. Acrobats and jugglers pulled stunts for handfuls of those silver bits which men seemed to crave so desperately. From some unseen corner, one of Evander's imported rhapsodes plucked apart a savage hexameter about glory and gore and bride theft. I tried to shut it out, scurrying to the remotest depths of my cave. It found me there. Tangled up in firesnakes, awash in the curses of the troglodyte dead, it found me there.

Unable to escape the song, I sought to drown it out instead, to boil the rhapsode's brains and bring his blood vessels to burst. A bloody howl to choke the very words from his throat. I gathered curses woven in tongues of fire demons. Profanities plucked from the cruelest chaos. Out from my cave I erupted, beating my breast, mourning the death of Evander's common sense. I mounted the rocks, unfurled my body at the peak of the cliff, so close to the bowl of the moon that I could wet my shoulders in its silvery, honeyed milk.

One among the camp of men heard my song. Only one. Not a man at all, in fact. She was a grandmother, had shocks of grey in her mouse-colored hair, which I could make out, bound up in a tight comb, all the way across the valley. I could see her looking up at me. She flinched at every yip or howl. She wore a funeral mask, expressionless. But I knew I had her attention. I could tell by her scent, so strong that I could hardly rid myself of visions of her enveloping me.

Dignified fear. That was the scent. Apprehension mixed with awe. And now I knew I was performing for this woman alone, indifferent to all the all the other sounds of the Arcadians. Noises and faces faded from view—Arcadian faces, and the faces of drunks, smiley, laps warm with urine. Tamesan drums and the scuttling sounds of the old crustaceans stamping out catalogues of ships evaporated. They blurred until they became nothing at all. White noise. The space between leaves.

Only the woman remained, enraptured by my song which I carried to new, depravedly secret depths, rattling off about Phlegethon the way other poets described the rosy chariot of dawn. But daylight never touched my verses. I sang of centaurs hunting humans around the rim of hell. I sang of Minos the judge, and of men condemned, broken and punished upon the spokes of his wheel for eternity. I beat out vicious rhythms with my feet atop the cliffs. Iambs divulging the unknowable topographies of the house of death settled like poison in that woman's breast. Breathing in, breathing out, imbibing my despicable ode. I conjured up the Eumenides from the black-resin heart of my song, and let Alecto fly between my audience and me. Chains rattled on the winds. I could see my music splitting the husk of that woman wide open, and I took delight in the slightest flared nostril, the faintest crease of discomfort that signaled the reception of some especially awful verse.

Immune to the din of the camp and the festival that was brewing there, my lines converged into a terrible, magnificent opus. Magnificently terrible. Terribly depraved. Wretched dactyls and old curses sweeter than a fistful of royal jelly. Profane intaglios presented to the wind, to Alecto still lurking there on black wings, who snatched them up in her talons and carried them off to the lap of the woman sitting petrified among the Arcadians. Yes, I saw her looking at me. Only she couldn't be looking at me. Couldn't be looking at my silhouette proper,

nor the finer details of my form—the wreaths of hooves and horns, my goatskin loincloth, dried blood of brothers and sons and probably that of a stray daughter or two. She was looking at my cave, more like. Or perhaps she saw the dull impression of something at the head of the cliff, something like fat or gristle shifting its weight before the moon. What she saw was the song coming out of all that darkness. Furious gusts of Alecto, esophagus twitchings drawing sparks at certain syllables. When I ran out of song, I panicked. (I still don't know why). It was as if I still had more to give this woman, and had not given her nearly enough already. She had been such a loyal audience member. We'd exchanged essences. I was within her now. I longed to have that feeling reciprocated, but she was lost at such a distance, and I knew the crowds would be too thick for me to reach her in time. Defeated, I gave a groaning bow. During Evander's hillside festivals, I'd seen the gesture performed. Once by a swordfighter who disemboweled his opponent with a broken straight-sword, and more frequently than that by the singers and rhapsodes who'd carried their ditties here from Greece. It was an invitation for the audience to give bread, wine, some of Evander's silver chits. But the woman was too far away to give me even a speck of gratitude.

My chest began to burn. My nostrils burned too. Once when I was a little whelp, one of my brothers pulled me down to the bottom of a lake and held me there for three nights. When I thought I couldn't hold my breath any longer, he hurled me towards the heavens, chucked me so high that the air disappeared and the constellations started to intrude on the blue of the sky. I gasped, still devoid of breath, though nothing came. Agony. Pain, white hot. Paralysis. Darkening. Swelling darkness followed by black. That was how I felt atop that cliff: unburdened of my song, and light, but unable to come up for air. When I came to as a child, I ripped my

brother's lungs out and used them as a cushion for the next hundred years. But the woman was well away. And her comrades were returning in bursts all around her.

Evander sat on a three-legged stool, a new provision, probably brought out to keep him steady through all the drink. His scepter lay across his lap and his fingers were tangled in the curls of his beard, which meant he was definitely drunk. I'd only seen him like that once before. Funny story, really. A bit of nostalgia from the younger days of our relationship. The old Arcadian had turned up blitzed outside my cave one night, totally unattended, brandishing a sword and buckler. His toga was undone. A cradle of purple wool came down between his thighs; his left nipple was exposed, shriveled. I didn't have the heart to kill him, so I sent out one of the billy goats instead. After a bout of light jousting, Evander reclaimed the goat for Greece. Then, into the night he fled.

He'd had nine cups with the hero. Nine that I saw. The hero drank thirty cups at least and more that I neglected to see, duped by the speed with which he downed each unending pewter mug. He even scooped the pressings out of the bottom of the mixing bowl, but he could have been drinking water for all the good it seemed to do him. Slaves kept carrying out stronger, bigger jars of wine. I enjoyed watching them struggle to open the beeswax seals on the jars with their flat, metal pry bars. Out of some backwards rite of hospitality, Evander was compelled to match the many cupfuls his guest consumed, which left him looking ghostly, badly shaking. He was joined on the left by a woman who took the scepter out of his lap. She began rubbing his shoulders, whispering to him tenderly. When he started to slouch, she socked him across the jaw. I chortled at the sight of this old maid roughing up her king in his drunken stupor. Then I inspected her closer. She was no old maid, but the woman who had heard me croon. And that woman was not nobody either. Too old to be the queen. Couldn't be Evander's nurse either—not

the way she handled the scepter or dressed her hair. Had to be his mother, the prophetess. His mother called Carmenta, who had penned the Latin alphabet herself and urged the Etruscans to forget my name as it originally was. I had heard much about her, stripped apart her charms as they dangled from the throats of men, or shackled her favorite champions to my cavern walls, eliciting from them bits and pieces of her prophecies. Fragments, really. Paltry sums which should have left their lips the moment they knew whose cave they were in. But I never imagined I'd see her in the flesh.

Carmenta. Yes, the prophetess' name was Carmenta. I remembered when I first heard it, and put that memory to her face as I stared at it across the hills. I had extracted the word from some Arcadian hunter years before; some still-living victim who had slipped on the rocks outside my cave, groaning there on the ground with his ankle obliterated. He didn't like it when I snatched that ankle out of the dark. He screamed a good and proper scream at that. His eyes retreated into his skull, lids still open, twitching, revealing thick forests of veins at the edge of white, pupiless wastelands. Dead weight, that body. Good as dead til I resuscitated it with glowing pokers in my cave. When the hunter came to he was spread-eagle on the rack and the lights were gone all throughout my lair. I asked him many questions about Evander, about the city, about whether he'd stumbled upon my cave on purpose, as a spy, or merely by accident, as a foolish offender of god. Festivals, I pressed him. Tell me about the festivals. Those reeking, god-awful festivals on the hill. Why did they perform them, and were they ever going to end? And were there any plans to throw a festival for me, in my honor, with jugglers and songs and sweetmeats in the vicinity of my cave? But most of all, I plugged him for intelligence on Evander's witch of a mother. He revealed her name at once. Carmenta. The syllables hung sweetly, half-visible in the air. I asked him could he write it. Yes. Could he write it in Etruscan?

He had to think about his answer. Yes. I undid his wrists, equipped him with a slab of stone and some charcoal. His hand produced the symbol, snatched it out of the air by divulging its shapes upon the stone. I marveled at the thing, uttering 'Carmenta'. Then I asked him were there any prophecies about me? Did Carmenta talk of me? Of Cacus? He didn't want to say. I kicked his mangled foot. When he still couldn't say, I kicked it again. He told me I would die, and that I didn't belong in the new world, so I kicked him again and didn't stop kicking. In all the agony, he bit through his tongue, choked on his own blood. Dead hunter on the floor of the cave. But his sigil remained.

I never put an ounce of faith in the oracles of soothsayers and magicians, but I liked to hear what they had to say. More a reflection of the diviner than the divine itself. Thoroughly corrupt, but rooted in the right places. Old places. Augurs and seers didn't get a pass with me, but I might stop to hear them out before I ruined them completely.

What did Carmenta know about me? What did she make of it all? The current situation happening outside my cave, right under my nose in the shadows of my fiery fists. How did she parse the whole of life? And why was her son such a lousy drunk? Greeks were meant to have a knack for the brimming bowl. They imported it, after all. Did Carmenta have any juicy prophecies about the hero with the club and the elegant hair? I wanted to hear them all. Wanted to collect them. Wanted to commemorate each one upon slabs of stone like the sounds of her name, 'Carmenta'. I didn't trust her, didn't trust any oracle, but I was dying to know what she had to say. We had complementary perspectives: I, a homunculus from the beginning of time, and she, the prophetess with eyes always future-gleaning.

But she became lost in the throng of the party. I couldn't make sense of it all, couldn't get close enough through the syrupy haze of music and barbecue and raucous Arcadians to unleash

myself upon their awful display. I wanted to end every one of them, but could not. Foregoing sleep, I rammed straight into the wall, bludgeoned myself automatically at quickening pace until I departed from the moment like a victim, stunned.

\*\*\*

**D**awn burst across the earth like a ruptured boil. Dawn painful and abrupt. Swell of light dawn. Lucifer rose first, priming the skyways purple. Aurora, the bright-fingered bringer of dawn, followed charging in hot pursuit; chased the morning star from her chariot while the hooves of her horses, Firebright and Daybright, cleaved the night into bloody, burning bits. Thunder of cavalry dawn. Whooping and hollering battle-cry dawn. Dawn that had not been divided from the dark by sleep, but turned out all at once. A great mystery laid bare, its secret truths a disappointment. Magic bled from that broken bond, drained down to the very last drop. Morning bloomed in full. Sober. Colder than ever in spite of a sun too blinding to bear.

I woke up hungry, although I had not truly slept. There had been no dreams to wake from. Emerged hungry, more like. Glimpsed the wet eyes of appetite through the self-inflicted concussion of the previous night. Running headlong into the walls did not so much put me out as it dampened and distorted the sounds of the hero's camp. I drooled for ages, dimly aware of the shape of my lair. Then, just like that, dawn. Dawn and unruly hunger. Piss and slop smell in the air. One darkwards glance revealed a gaunt flock, and only the named among my number of sheep were left. But I would have flung them all from the rocks for the opportunity to violate that hero in repose.

The huge bones of great Hercules lay in a mound among the cattle. Snoring, pitching flank to flank as though he dreamt the ground a lake of fire, suffering every lick as his supple

ribs burned, as his liver broiled from within that oily sack of flesh. Hercules. Now I had a name by which to brand that awful invader. ‘Hercules’. That name, with its triply terrible syllables, had penetrated my cave on the wine-dark wings of boasts.

“I’ve been killing (hiccup) monsters in Greece. Three-headed ones and (hiccup) big, yellow, fangy ones. See this skin? I’ve got a (hiccup) a thousand more like it in all the brutes I’ve yet to thrash. But I will. Just you wait and (hiccup) see. This Hercu (hiccup) Hercules has monsters yet to kill. Count on that. I’ll punish them all. (hiccup)”

“Io, Hercules!” Called the Etruscans.

Evander’s men cheered, they clapped, although old Evander himself was too drunk to keep his neck bone straight. Then the hero, Her-Cu-Les, called out:

“Sing that one about the boat! With the fleece and the Hydra.”

And that ship and the evening took a similar course as the story spun out. Meanwhile, my bludgeoned dreams manipulated that name, Hercules.

Stoned on last night’s wine, the Greek snored. His lion skin was loose, bunched up under his neck and shoulders with the frozen jaws of the creature wrapped around the crown of his head. He’d left his sandals to dry on the bank of the river. Someone had puked on them before the night was finished—a servant from Northern Etruria, whose ears and nose could still be seen spitted on a couple of bare branches overhead. Hercules’ wineskin, his anodynes, and his oils sat in disarray around his head like hurried gifts for the grave. The secret formulas of his strength, of his perfect, godlike hair, lay in the grass ripe for anyone’s taking. I loved and loathed and agonized over that hair, close enough now to smell. Grapeseed. Honey. Olive oil, of course, mixed with thyme, fennel perhaps. Vaguely meaty, all the oozes and unguents struck by sunlight through the circles of primed rings, visibly glistening. I coveted that hair. Envisioned the crown I



could make with that thick, hero's coiffe. And of course, sitting off to the left was the tri-knotted club, balanced against the trunk of an ilex tree, unguarded except by the shade, but menacing enough by merit of its harsh design. It was caked in the black blood of immortals. I whiffed metallic death on that thing. From the grain of the wood rose remote histories and musks of old gods, cold memories, grown colder still in death, joined by the recognizable fragments of brother monsters, turned shades now, turned out of the this earth and cast down to the pits to drink Lethe waters while the ranks of the world were flooded with stinking, rotting menfolk. Geryon was dead. I heard his tissues quivering between the knots of the club like lyre strings wound tight. Wanted to pluck that note. Pluck the sound of Geryon crying out and the sounds of a thousand others, shouting all at once in a tremendous chord of lips and tongues and throats dried out and scabbed across the face of the club.

“What are you doing?”

Tiberius' voice surfaced through the scum of the river. There was a sound of ice splitting, veins forming and popping, followed by the familiar trickle and splash of the thaw. I caught the river god out of the corner of my left eye, stopped in the midst of my scheming and absorbed his image in-full, toga-clad, gravely clutching a large amphora, with a beard of lichen and minnows and angler's baubles.

“Taking my due,” I rasped.

I spoke in Etruscan. Glanced back at my cave, careful not to wet the soles of my feet in Tiberius' channel. Back when I was nothing but a humble ogre, Tiberius and I would feud and tussle on the open plains, pitting floods against wildfires, bare-fisted, interlocking claws and foreheads, and nasty, gnashing, deathless spite. But since then I had become a god. I knew the shapes of symbols and letters, had accepted prizes of libations at my doorstep. I had developed a

new air of dignity. Tiberius would not get my supplication, but neither could I afford to do him any harm, so I settled for a minor gesture of respect, and kicked one of Hercules' bags of silver in the river god's direction.

“Crossing my lake, stirring up trouble, Cacus. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Your father was one of the greats, you know? He used to make things—fine things—which our brothers and sisters used in spades. Even my father, Oceanus, once commissioned a trident from your dad. A splendid weapon of solidified mercury, capable of piercing any surface, and impossible to remove except by utterance of a magic phrase known only to my father and the smith. He was a man of honor like that. You could trust him with a secret.”

“My father adored me,” I scowled. “My father put me in charge of this place: these hills and these dark forests and the valleys that clench everything on either side your river. You run through me, Tiberius. You ought to see, plain as anyone else, that this Greek motherfucker is a threat to us all. Take some of the cattle. They were Geryon's by right. It ain't thieving if you're getting from another thief. That's my aim. To eat. To feast on a hearty offering and plan my destruction of this Her-Cu-Les piece of shit.”

“The man's a hero, you know?” said Tiberius. The river god stumbled, slipping here and there as water overflowed from his amphora. “He's the son of our father's father; Father to us all: Grim-faced Jupiter who marshals the storm. Have some respect. He's on a mission from the gods. Retribution for some nasty business back home.” Tiberius scratched his fishy beard with a free hand, let a bit of the liquid slosh out of his jar. “But you needn't agonize over the details. Everything this man has done is leagues above you.”

“No more Greek shit.” I was raging now. “We have enough here. Just got used to what little I can stand, but any more of them and we'll never get them out. He's a murderer.”

“You’re more murderer than him and you don’t even have the decency to do it with the grace of a weapon.”

Now that stunned me for a moment. But I spoke, confessed in fact, as I saw no reason to deceive the god.

“True, I kill them. I kill them because they are flesh and blood, while we—we are god-stuff, forged with immunity to the ages. Forged with purpose. My purpose is to cull them from this land and keep it clean for the day the gods return to earth. Pride is a punishable offense. My father knew that, and he passed that along to me. The Etruscans knew better. Maybe you don’t remember, always hiding at the bottom of your little pond, but we enjoyed an age of true worship under them. These Arcadians, these Greeks? They aren’t right in the head. They’ve got no piety. It’s only right to stamp them out. You’re right about the weapon though. I’d never given it much thought. Maybe I’ll make my own.”

“Why not take the hero’s club while you’re stealing from him?” asked Tiberius.

“Too much familiar blood on that thing. He’s been killing in the wrong direction.”

“You’re no better than him, Cacus. Just see where it gets you? I hear murmurs of prophecies, you know? Even in a freeze, the tongues of divination can’t elude me.”

Our speech ended there. I resumed my efforts, claspings two choice young heifers by their tails. Before I could do anything about that wretched hero, the Greek named Hercules, I’d have to eat my fill, recuperate a bit. My skull was throbbing still, no less severe for the sun burning overhead. Wretched, searing thing. Branding my backside. I dragged the cows backwards into my cave, careful to make sure that the tracks appeared to lead away from the place. No need to alert the hero just yet. Marched far into my lair, I let the cows stand there in the dark, ruminating on cud, while I stoked a bed of coals with a belch.

But then an awful sound crashed on the hills, shook my cave, and I slipped mid-flame. Sparks licked the black walls, leapt across straw and congealed fat, arcing til a grim fire burned. The cows began to low. Big, deep-voiced, stupid things. My goats didn't know what to make of them. They backed into a corner, lit up terribly by the oil fire. Only the billy goat stamped bravely, leering at the head of the flock. He kept the cows in his angular gaze. Must have suspected them of bringing the fire that was raging. That billy goat had the name of Pallas, a real prize of a beast, grown old and knotted and weathered under my wing. His balls hung lopsided, engorged. A Pleiades of warts crossed that black scrotum. How I loved to trace those stars. But currently, I had no time for my goats or the merits of tough Pallas. I attempted to smother the fire with my chest. Flattened my body across the leaping flames. It stung and seared, bubbled up into blisters, popping the embossed tissue of my scars. I had to smother those damned, lowing cows as well. Outside the noise was getting worse. The cave was growing hot from the fuel burning slowly over the floor. Several of the goats were beginning to start. Their wooly flanks took light. Auroras burned across the flock of hides. They bleated, clipped their hooves. Some rammed their heads aimlessly into the rock. Copy cats. But I couldn't mind them. Not now. Not while Hercules was raging and roaming outside. And the lowing wouldn't stop. So I crushed the throat of the cow on the right—the loudest bastard—and the lowing came to a halt.

Never mind the fire. I leapt to the front of my cave, took watch along the high, hidden crags. Hercules was scouring the hills, plunging his head past Tiberius' banks to search through the water, or under the tails of his remaining herd, for the two missing head of cattle. Oh how that club leapt and bound, hung about that muscled shoulder jaunting. It was in full swing now. Hefting the club in both hands, the hero split trees at the mid-trunk. He smashed boulders, flung foxes and nesting things high into the firmament. He slung dirt and rocks and beetles and ancient

bronzes turned loose by his own hero's hand. Then his cattle started lowing. What an awful bovine racket. It crossed Tiberius' banks, climbed up the hills and tickled the farthest depths of my lair with its low vibrations. And gods be damned that remaining cow lowed back. Mooed idiotically. Out came its call, out from the dark like the bellow of an invalid child. Now the hero was on to something.

"I accept the invitation!" shouted Hercules from outside the cave. By the dark machinations of the gods, the Greek had found his way to my lair entrance. He was pressing hard now, rattling his club against my door.

But I was resolved to keep that Greek out of my cave. I'd have him on the banks or in the shadows of the low river valleys. I'd string his guts from the treetops, feed his eyes to the loping birds, but I would not spoil my cave with his shiny, hero's pomp. No time for the lowing beast at the back of my cave. Instead I moved to rip trees and roots and nets of lichen from the front of the cave, and with those, I endeavored to seal it off. I formed a bulwark of debris. No Etruscan king or hero would breach the limits of my domain. No Greek invader, washed in from the north like shit downstream. A draught of wine at least still raged in staggering Hercules' skull. The cows communicated call and response. But passage inside still eluded the hero. It was all I could do to keep from howling with laughter. I stopped myself though, for the cattle sound was more than enough. Out through the cracks of my defenses I stared. Watched the hero traipsing back and forth, ravaging the land with kicks and club-swings. Tiberius and I would have a word once Hercules was in the ground. No doubt about that. We'd see where his hero stood then.

I mourned the dead of my flock. Mourned them in the dark. That stupid, lowing cow was still standing. Hardly grey from the ash of the blaze. But many of the goats had fallen. A few fat she-goats in particular. No more milk or pressed cheeses. And Pallas, the billy goat, who had so

valiantly defended his own, had been melted into a warped black altar of horns and desiccated wool. I stuffed my gobs with what bits of meat were salvageable. Felt the stinging, burned up flesh consolidating in my stomach. It sat there like a stone.

Cassius was chattering near the front of the cave. Alarmed about something. Lucius and Brutus, his brother heads, had gone silent in the dark. They didn't like the blockage of trees or the uprooted earth that plugged the mouth of the cave. That skull had ranked among the Etruscans. While he was still alive, at least. Now he was mine, a token piece of sorcery bequeathed by a roving hag in the earliest days of humanity. Those times were alright. The Etruscans gave me good and proper alms. I'd told Tiberius as much. They'd come into this world regarding me as flame and forge and mountain foe. I was Vulcan's charge in those days, and I still was, but the Arcadians had other ideas about which spirits and household gods to hold in reverence. Now their hero was beating down my door. Bludgeoning and bashing my makeshift walls with his club—that terrible, thudding club. Cassius was right when he said it was over. But I wasn't ready to take omens from his toothy mug. I socked him straight where the teeth should have been, and the plates of his skull exploded. Cassius fell all over the tunnel floor. Dead for real now. No good to anyone.

First I smelled the blood, like iron. Then I tasted ash, felt waves of pain cresting against my brow. Then I heard the whole oppressive drone of the club. I knew my life was spent. Hercules had bashed his way into my cave. Now, eyes aglow with rage, he gripped the tail of the living heifer in one hand, and swung on me with the other.

Constellations and the triple fangs of the hero's club—things I saw when that Greek laid into me. No minor cudgel in the dark. The fist of a god, no two ways about it. All of a sudden,

my skull was ringing as bold and as dark as the tunnels of my cave. My body collapsed into the sea of goats. My back broke on theirs. Matted fur caught itself on the ridges of my spine.

As I lay there on the cold floor, skin flecked with rocks and shards of bone, watching the whites of Hercules' eyes, rolling, revolving damp in a blood frenzy, the same story played out line by line in my mind. It was a story about my father, undone by Apollo. Shamed in his own marriage bed. His wife had run off with the archer god, but they hadn't run far. They didn't need to. My father's foot was a useless lump of cartilage, incapable of moving at any speed beyond a shuffle. They heard my father as he breached the bedchambers, foot scraping against the floor, but they did not stop, Apollo and my father's wife. She was gorgeous, they say, although I'd never seen her. She was not my mother, after all. Apollo had it so good he didn't dare to budge, so my father caught him right in the act. He wouldn't have been able to catch them in a race, but there, cornered in his bed, he had them. He fastened chains and locks around them, and put them on display for all Olympos to see. But when he brought them before the others, they simply laughed at him. There was never any justice for the practical gods.

And I was a god, as righteous and terrible as they come, but now, Hercules was splattering my god-stuff all over those dingy, fat-spackled walls.

What a miserable little cave it was. I saw that now. Saw its blackened tunnels sink in on me, surround my face and press against my eyes. Felt the rage of my father's furnace roaring up inside myself. Throughout my muscles, down the slopes of my veins a hoary, painted smoke was rising. Poised to billow out in a horrendous flash. I told that pompous Greek to come closer. To come lick the blood he'd drawn from my fractured jaw.

A flash of fire came out of me. All at once, every ounce of power streamed forth, molten waves crashing on that hero's head. He fell back, landing hard on his tailbone with a satisfying

wallow. But it was all too late and Hercules came back at me with more force than ever. Divided the welter from the waste in my chaotic body, partitioning choice organs and singular ribs to the corners of my cave.

Consciousness remained in the ribbons of flesh Hercules scattered. A piece of me, one of the good pieces, a chunk of liver, went careening out the mouth of the cave. Fell flat on the land. Grass and ants and all sorts of dirt were upon the thing. A bloated, dusty organ. Still heaving though. Pitching across the earth. Leaping and rolling along, mounting the minor slopes, until it tasted the freshwater of Tiberius' streams.

Breezes were blowing around the river. Old Tiberius was squatting there, dabbing up the contents of his spilled vase. He paid no attention to my mute lump of flesh. Imperceptibly, it writhed. While I pitched and heaved upon the grass, Tiberius rattled off an old song. I'd heard it before. Couldn't remember where. But I'd heard it. I was sure of it. Sounded like a sailor's song, all full of dryads, sirens, Scyllas and Charybdis. In the song a man was always getting overturned. Tossed this way and that. Buffeted along the open sea or house to house on the islands of witches. How he had come to this fate I didn't know. I'd missed that part of the song. Must have still been in the cave then, struggling with that awful brute they call Hercules.

I'd eaten owls in the dead of night. Stuffed my gobs three or four times with their downy, silvery feathers. Gobbled up all that wisdom in the dark moonlight. I'd watched Arcadians blanch all the way across the hills, seen men turn tail and split into six separate divisions through my knotted woods. How many times had Evander approached my cave, only to shiver and quit? How many times? Too many to count. Once upon a time we had a relationship, that Arcadian and I. He crept up to my lair with golden trophies. I spared his menfolk, his hogs, his brides. But now that god-awful demon Hercules had muddled the whole scheme. Tiberius was still whistling



bright. Fool that he was, too blind to see what was looming on the horizon, all flashing bronze and rattle of shields. His banks would soon overflow. Not with fish or with cattails either.

I'd seen sandals bound to thundering feet. Cold cobblestones along the ground. Walls rising and falling out of fashion and existence. I'd witnessed parapets; grotesque gargoyles in distant, gothic hills. But mostly I saw that sad, old river god Tiberius. Still young in Olympian terms, but weathered from a life out on the open hills. He served a tactile function. Got down and dirty, muddying himself on the banks where he'd hardened under the sun.

Then Tiberius came along, sloshing along the banks of the river, trailing muck and swamp water behind him. He walked in my direction. Notes from the sailor's song still hung in his breath. His lips parted. His teeth combed notes and formed sharp inflections as he narrated shipwrecks, close calls, and loveless nights on desolate rocks. His blue toenails closed in on me. Struck the hunk of liver that remained and sent it flopping like a trout back into the coursing river. Out of the familiar Aventine I sailed, clinging to that singular organ. Still, somewhere else, I felt the fragments of my body converge. Pulled together as if drawn by a magnet. I'd seen such a device in my time. Back in my father's forge. He had massive pillars of the metal from which hung his most prized creations: Dread spears, twisted bronze torques, radiant circlets worked from mercury and steel. So now, every piece of me orbited around a central point. A pinhole sinking down into greater darkness where the flocks of the dead were summoned. Every piece except that hunk of liver, travelling downstream, indifferent to the pull of Dis, ignoring the hell that beckoned from the shadowy vapors underground.

Men had found portals into the underworld before. I'd heard one of Evander's men discussing it in my forests one night, in the twilight of the evening when he died beneath the weight of my foot. Said he knew of a tunnel leading down to hell. Said it was by the beach. I

knew of such a tunnel. I wasn't allowed to say a word about it, of course, but I knew it was there. That was how it was. How it used to be. Back before men came along, snooping around and sticking their snouts every which way. Nothing was sacred anymore, or else it became sacred and men adorned it to death with oils and feasts and their sour perfume offerings. Thigh Bones wrapped in fat. Lofty Hecatombs. One hundred cattle stunned and slashed at once, their blood drained into stone pits. Gods forbid that the blood should touch the ground. Forbidden from flooding down to defile the earth or else some batfaced fury bitch would come screaming out of the darkness to rip priests' families limb from limb. Furies didn't fuck around. I thought of Alecto, flying back and forth between Carmenta and me on that previous night. What a time that was! But now, nothing. Mute ash. Silence. Gifts of the grave. Who would come to visit me in the underworld, I wondered? And then I didn't. Spiraling downward into the blackness like that hunk of liver caught in a Veronan stream. Minnows nipped away at it. Scrambled it, converting it into a fine red mist. My descent made complete. Those last beads of conscious dispersed in the black water, and I was gone.

### III.

#### Underworld, Post-Cycle

**F**rom the underworld I weep. My cries go unheard. No Carmenta or trembling Etruscans to mark them with goblets, with goats and golden trophies. I sit by some grey body of water, never mind which. They're all the same here. All colorless and converging through the low-hanging tunnels outside the house of the dead. I have not passed through those walls yet. I do not wish to. Instead, I linger in the black shadow of Dis. Fellow shades hang on either side, palsied up by the banks, pushing the currents with dried branches or tending their wounds like me. My head still leaks from the fissure where Hercules clobbered me with his many-toothed club. My skull is split wide. There's no hope for my left eye. It rolled off somewhere far and cold and distant in my cave. If I'm lucky, that is. Chances are, the hero's club obliterated the thing when it struck. Probably plucked the eye clear out with the rounded end of a knot. Fluids still leak from the wound. A thick resin forms. Meanwhile, a red light burns in my right socket. Precious seed of fire. I can see through the flames, perceiving the world refracted, doubled over on itself. My embers and my father's ashes seethe within the portal of that infernal eye. With it, I scan the entirety of death's banks.

Hades' black house rises in the south. Thorn-rimmed walls keep out the rabble of shades—spirits wayward and dispossessed. The very architecture of death is modelled after man. Man, who is designed to die, who embodies mortality before all others because oblivion awaits him and he knows it. Death is a secret which every man possesses, whether he divulges it or not, and so he becomes the underworld's greatest client. All the trappings of hell are designed to cater to humanity, yet death can do nothing for this mob of deceased who stumbled through its portals

without coin or peace of mind. Kings, heroes, priests, champion dice throwers. I watch their lot at ease on the back of the old man's skiff, dressed in purples as bright in the gloom as they were in life, and wonder how many dozens of shades one scrap of a champion's tunic might save. But men squabble. They divide. They amputate themselves from themselves, each limb believing that the tumor is on the other end of the razor's edge. Even in death. Especially in death. The kings drift away to lilyed Elysium. Heroes and athletes wrestle eternally on mounds of tawny sand. Separated by concentric, circular walls, the unspectacular dead dither in the suburbs of paradise. Father still, on the very outskirts of death's domain, pressed against the walls in all manner of unsavory contortions, sinners endure their punishments. I cannot see them. Not well, at least. Some are visible through the cracks in the walls. Others are hoisted intermittently above the ramparts on stakes or breaking wheels. But mostly it's their screams that escape. Unsporting violence carried out beyond the limits of good taste. What is the point in harming a man if he doesn't think he has a sliver of a chance at getting away? Even I have grown weary of the ceaseless agony this place peddles. Back when I ruled the Aventine—now more a blurred impression of a place than a memory—I never delighted in torture. To take a life was a precious thing. Whenever the moment came, I always made concision my art. But here, now, in the moment of death unending, I no longer feel the familiar draw of flesh. It engulfs me, musky, half-immaterial and grey. My red eye burning, last vestige of my godhead, sets me apart from the throng of shades. I isolate myself further. There is no privacy here. Shades coming and going, and shades simply waiting, populate every ridge, every ragged heath, filling even the furthest limits of the banks with their groans. Once one wanders too far from the water or Hades' house, the terrain simply doubles back.

There is no escape from limbo except through Pluto's gates. Beyond those gates, last rights are ministered. Everyone, including the gods, receives a charnel plot. A bed of ash. An urn perhaps. Bones still rattle inside the vessels of the recently deceased. You can hear the new shades holding their urns up to their ears, shaking them with breasts full of hope, but the sounds are those of an exposed child who's been giving a rattle to play with before he's devoured by wild dogs.

I am content to remain here. Content to live among vagrant shades. After all, it's not like anyone is going to offer incense or oblations at my plot. My tomb is an altar celebrating Hercules' savage act. They honor the murder itself, rather than the victim. Meanwhile, birds strip my remains, scattering the ribbons on foreign peaks. Nobody cares. Not the Arcadians. Not the Twelve. Not even the minor gods on earth. No gifts for the grave will reach me, because none will be sent.

So I embrace this new life. More of an un-life, but no more monotonous than that cave had become. I wonder if Crispus or Cassius or Brutus are down here. Or did my amateur necromancies spread their spirits too thin? I thought I'd heard the whimpering of a shade when I smashed Cassius' skull. That uncertain hour has come to haunt me. I am possessed by a phantom of myself. I search for Cassius in the crowds. Look for a beard, or a wand, or that old codger's smile. His grin had crowned my door for ages. Now it is lost. Confused among so many other faces, each one more like a stranger's than the last as I confront a horde of men I cannot seem to kill.

Not all the stragglers are bad though. One of the men who sits on the bank was a poet in his life. He refuses to drink the Lethe waters ministered at the gates of death because he's afraid he'll forget all his songs. Remaining on the banks, he sings instead, frozen out of time and

immune to the cycle of reintegration. Souls migrate; they pass on after a time in lilled Elysium or pummeled raw in the black depths of hell and become resubstantiated in some other sack of flesh. Some other husk and bones.

The poet has a song about Hercules, and it's a hilarious one. I ask him to play it again and again. Sometimes he does. I'm not sure if it's because he can actually hear my request, or if it's just one of his favorites too. Voices drift and flutter away in the underworld. Languages converge or disappear entirely, and words are often lost in the darkness of it all. But his lyrics ring true, clarion through all the murky resin of death. It's a savage poem about that Greek lout. One that paints him as the drunken buffoon he is. I can't tell if it's satire or prophecy, but at the end of it, Hercules gets poisoned by his old lady in his house. He dies a slow and pitiful death at the hands of his wife.

As the story goes, Hercules is on his second bride, since bad things are always happening to the ladies in his life. The poet won't divulge too much, but he sings about some business with a frenzy, with a pantomime club and the slaughter of youths in Hercules' former house. Enterprising hero that he is though, Hercules finds a second bride straight away, and seduces her by murdering the centaur taking advantage of her down by a stream. Hercules pierces the creature with a poison-dipped arrow. The life leaves the centaur, and in his dying breaths, he mixes his blood with the venom and hands it over to the bride.

"It's a love potion," says the Centaur, claspng it into the bride's palm.

And oh how useful such a concoction would be for the bride. The life of a hero's wife is unfulfilling, sings the poet, since the hero proper is always away from the home completing heroic tasks. And no hero has ever had a more substantial itinerary of quests and charges than Hercules himself, forever held in yoke by that enterprising king. She feels the spark failing. The

face of her husband is a foreign sight. Blood-painted too. She fears for the children. Fears for the house. So she weaves a tunic for her man, and dyes it sleek Tyrian purple, adding the Centaur's anodyne in the final drops. But do not let Hercules dress except for in the dark. Such are the terms of the instructions the centaur gave that day, now far off, a thought marooned on those distant banks. But by the time the hero slips the tunic over his head, his lungs are tight, his skin varicose. Out run the children, spitting and wailing their grief. They clasp at the trailing clothing of their mother, master perpetrator, unwitting murderess. How she should have known when the leftover dregs of potion boiled like acid on the floor where she discarded it. And oh, poor Lichas, innocent messenger, who fell to a fate so like my own under the brunt of Hercules' wrath. When the hero puts on that toxic robe, he lashes out at the deliverer. He forces the frothing brain to ooze from Lichas' skull, reducing the skull to splinters, and the blood scatters therewith, staining the tiles forever more. And he almost thrashes his wife as well, the brute, but the pain is too much by then, and soon, the truth comes trickling out, like those initial beads of wine. Nessas is at fault—that centaur from the past, murderer from beyond the grave. What a beautifully amusing tragedy it is! How that hero throws himself upon the pyre to end the pain, engulfed by the very fires of my domain. I love the song like a brother, and goad the poet to play it day after day. Not that a single day is discrete from all the rest beneath the ashen vault of death.

And somewhere, out on the Aventine, behind Evander's timber walls, some prophetic mother is singing about a time in the not-so-distant future, when the world has made sufficient use of its Hercules. Better blood and black ships are coming. According the poet, that is. Plumed helmets and a haggard man from Asia. Old Hercules will be plunged down into the earth soon enough. A god like all the rest. Coursing with the same blood as those he killed. And when his rampage is over, he'll find the world bereft of gods and wonders. Carmenta plucks her words as

the poet plucks his words, and we recline in the shadows of the underworld, reduced now to shades ourselves.





## Bibliography

- Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. N. 482-509.
- Beard, Mary. "Last Words: Roman Epitaphs and Their "Afterlife"" Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities. Olin Auditorium, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. 29 Sept. 2015. Lecture.
- Boyle, A. J., and Roger D. Woodard. *Fasti*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- Green, Peter. *The Poems of Catullus*. Berkeley: U of California, 2005.
- "Fasti." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. N.d. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.
- Lombardo, Stanley. *Aeneid*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2005.
- "Maecenas, Gaius." N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- "Ovid." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. N.d. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.
- Sullivan, J. P. *the Satyricon*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1986.
- Warrior, Valerie M. *The History of Rome, Livy, Books 1-5*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 2006.