

The cave goes on and on, deeper than it should, deeper than any place meant for living, the dark folding in on itself until it feels less like stone and more like a throat swallowing me whole, and I let it, I chose it, dragged the stones across the mouth one by one in those first years when my body was stronger and the fire sat quieter in my chest, telling myself it was for the cattle, for their warmth, their breathing, something living to fill the hollow where voices should have been, though even then I knew the truth I would not name—that I was not keeping them in, I was keeping everything else out, the sun most of all, because light asks questions I cannot answer.

Untouched by the sun's rays.

I made sure of that.

There is a fire in me that never goes out, not like a hearth, not like something tended and useful, but something buried and waiting, something that climbs my throat when I breathe too deep, when I think too long, smoke slipping from my nostrils, heat pressing against my teeth as if I might crack open and spill it, and in those moments the walls glow and I almost believe it—that I am not a mistake, not something left behind when the gods turned their faces away, but something forged, something chosen.

Almost.

Then it fades, and I am here again, half of one thing, half of another, whole in neither, too aware to be beast, too broken to be man, and never once called son except by the echo of a name that was never given freely. Vulcan's son. Monster. Half. The words hang even in silence, hammered into me like iron, ringing long after the strike.

The heads came later.

Not for hunger. Never for hunger.

I set them at the entrance, drove them into the wood and stone where the cave narrows, facing outward so they would be the first thing seen, the last thing remembered, and I told myself it was a warning, that I was keeping hunters away, that I was protecting what little I had made mine—but that was not it, not truly. They are a confession. Proof. I wanted eyes upon me, even if they no longer see. I wanted to be known as something. Feared is still a kind of being.

Sometimes I look at them and remember that someone came close enough to strike, close enough to be struck down. Someone found me worth facing.

. That matters more than it should.

The cattle I stole with care, with thought, guiding them backward so their tracks would lead away from me, toward the river, toward the world I do not enter, and they

would call it cleverness if they knew, trickery, cruelty sharpened into wit—but it was never that. I could not bear to see the marks pointing inward, could not bear to see proof of what I take, only what leaves. Always what leaves.

Always away from me.

The cave breathes with them, slow and damp, their bodies shifting in the dark, hooves scraping stone, the only rhythm I have kept, the only measure of passing time, though I have long since forgotten the count, the numbers dissolving into the same endless stretch of dark and fire and thought, until memory itself feels foreign—like something I overheard rather than lived.

There was a day—perhaps—when I climbed.

I remember the cliff edge, the wind, the shock of space without walls, and far off, smoke rising in a thin, certain line, not like mine, not hidden, but declared, a signal, a presence. A camp. A man. A name that would be spoken and carried and remembered.

I did not go down.

I never go down.

The world belongs to those who are whole, to those the gods claim without hesitation, to those whose names do not fracture in the mouth. I am what remains when something goes wrong. I am what is buried. I am the warmth under the earth that no one thanks, the breath that burns and gives nothing.

I am the son who cannot be held.

The stone feels different now.

It carries something. A tremor. A rhythm not my own.

The cattle know it before I do, their bodies pressing back, lowing soft and afraid, their fear filling the cave until it presses against my skin, until even the fire in me shifts, listening.

He is coming.

A hero, perhaps. One of the named ones.

For a moment I think—open the cave, let them go, drive them out backward as before, erase the signs, leave nothing but dark and silence, return to what I have always been.

The thought lingers.

Then it breaks.

I am tired.

Tired of the turning away, of the careful lies, of the empty cleverness that hides nothing, of being the place things flee from, the dark they escape, the thing unnamed except in fear.

The fire stirs.

Closer now.

Let him come.

Let him see.

Not the tracks, not the tricks, not the shadows I have wrapped around myself, but this—what stands in the dark and breathes and waits, what burns without light, what lives without place among gods or men—and let him carry it with him, just for a moment, before the strike, before the story hardens into something clean and simple, let him wonder what it is he has found here.

Monster.

Or mirror.

...

I do not move.

I wait.

□

My creative response is inspired by the Roman myth of Hercules and Cacus as told in Virgil's *Aeneid* 8.184-300 (1st century BCE). In this passage, King Evander explains to Aeneas how Hercules killed the fire-breathing monster Cacus, son of Vulcan, who had stolen cattle and hidden them in a cave on the Palatine Hill. The module taught me that this myth functions as aetiology—it explains why Romans worshipped Hercules at the Forum Boarium, making the Greek hero a founding figure of Roman identity and connecting Augustus's reign to divine heroism. This political function—using myth to legitimize power—became the lens through which I approached my creative rewrite.

Reading Virgil's text critically, I noticed how Cacus is denied interiority. He is described externally: "the fell shape," "half-human," "fresh blood," heads "nailed to the doors." Virgil describes Cacus's cave as "receding to vast depths," "untouched by the sun's rays," a space of absolute darkness that enables his monstrosity. I took this physical description and made it psychological: the cave becomes not just Cacus's

hiding place but his consciousness itself, endless, self-swallowing, lightless. When Virgil writes that Cacus "belched out his dark fires," I transformed this external violence into internal burden—the fire that "climbs my throat," the heat "pressing against my teeth." These reimaginings required close attention to Virgil's Latin and its English translations, a process that deepened my understanding of how translation itself shapes meaning. The module's emphasis on myth as received and transformed across cultures prepared me to see Virgil's text not as authoritative source but as one intervention in an ongoing tradition—an intervention I could counter-intervene in. He never speaks, never explains, never resists his own monstrosity. I wanted to know what this creature—son of a god, capable of fire and strategy, living in darkness—might think and feel. This curiosity led me to choose a first-person monologue, a form that grants direct access to consciousness and refuses the external, objectifying gaze Virgil employs. The monologue enacts Cacus's isolation: there is no dialogue, no other voice, only the endless circling of memory and sensation in the cave's darkness.

My formal choices emerged from this decision. I used Virgil's own imagery—the cave "receding to vast depths," "untouched by the sun's rays"—but transformed them from physical threats into psychological spaces. The fire that Virgil makes a weapon becomes, in my version, a burden of divine inheritance: "something buried and waiting," the unasked-for gift of a father who never claimed him. The fragmented rhythm—long breathless sentences collapsing into fragments like "Almost" or "I wait"—mirrors Cacus's fractured identity: "half of one thing, half of another, whole in neither." The present tense creates immediacy and traps the reader in mythic time, the eternal now where these stories always unfold.

I deliberately changed Cacus's motivation from the original. Virgil's monster steals from greed and hides from fear; mine steals from loneliness, guiding cattle "backward so their tracks would lead away from me... I could not bear to see proof of what I take, only what leaves." This shift allowed me to explore what the module taught me about mythic monsters as mirrors—they reflect what the hero must destroy to become himself. The heads on the wall, which Virgil presents as trophies of cruelty, become in my version a confession: "Feared is still a kind of being." By giving Cacus awareness of his role in Hercules's story—"before the story hardens into something clean and simple"—I question the binary of hero/monster that serves political propaganda.

This focus on interiority connects to broader themes from the module regarding how mythology constructs identity through exclusion. The module explored how myths across cultures—Greek, Roman, Chinese, Brazilian—create "monsters" as necessary others against which civilization defines itself. My Cacus speaks back to this tradition, claiming subjectivity where Virgil allows only objectification. The act of creative writing itself became a form of critical engagement: by inhabiting the monster's voice,

I tested the boundaries of the myth's ideology, finding its pressure points and silences. This practice-based research—learning through making—revealed dimensions of the Cacus myth that analytical reading alone could not access. The creative process was not separate from critical thinking but an extension of it, a method of inquiry that produced knowledge through embodiment and affect rather than distance and abstraction

This engagement with Virgil's text required attention to what the module taught me about cultural translation—how Greek myths were repurposed for Roman political needs. Heracles becomes Hercules; the indigenous monster must be destroyed so Roman space can be claimed as civilized. My response explores what is lost: the local, the monstrous, the voice that cannot speak Latin. By writing Cacus's interiority, I am not retelling but interrogating silences—the assumptions about who deserves voice, who deserves violence, who deserves remembrance. The module's emphasis on myth as negotiation rather than fixed text allowed me to see my own writing as part of this ongoing process. Just as Virgil adapted Greek material for Roman purposes, I adapt Virgil for contemporary critical purposes. Each retelling is a choice about whose voices matter, whose suffering counts, whose story gets told. My Cacus does not expect redemption; he expects to be misunderstood. Yet in choosing to wait, to be seen, to force the hero to wonder "what it is he has found here," he performs a small act of resistance. He insists on complexity where the myth demands simplicity, on humanity where it demands monstrosity. This insistence is what the module ultimately taught me: myths are not prisons but conversations, and even the most marginalized voice might still change the terms.

Writing this piece revealed that myths are not fixed texts but negotiations—between conqueror and conquered, voice and silence, memory and forgetting. By choosing to "wait" rather than flee or fight, my Cacus claims agency that Virgil denies him. The creative process deepened my understanding of mythology as contested terrain where identity is forged—and where the excluded, the monstrous, the half-human might still speak, if only we choose to listen.

WORKS CITED

Primary Source:

Virgil. *Aeneid*, Book 8, lines 184-300. 1st century BCE. [Module primary text, UWTSD HP4006]

Module Materials:

UWTSD. HP4006 Mythology: Myths and Mythology: How Stories Shape the World.
2025-2026. Lecture materials, seminar discussions, and module handbook.