The Cyclops in the Ocean
Nikki Giovanni

Moving slowly... against time... patiently majestic... the cyclops... in the ocean... meets no Ulysses... Through the night... he sighs... throbbing against the shore... declaring... for the adventure... A wall of gray... gathered by a slow touch... slash and slither... through the waiting screens... separating into nodules... making my panes... accept the touch...

Not content... to watch my frightened gaze... he clamors beneath the sash... dancing on my sill...

Certain to die... when the sun... returns...

Tropical Storm Dennis
August 15–18, 1981, Florida

The Enchantress Circe

After sailing from the Cyclops’s island, Odysseus and his men land on the island of Aeolia. There the wind king, Aeolus (’e-o-lus’), does Odysseus a favor. He puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. The bell’s-hide bag containing the winds is wedged under Odysseus’s afterdeck. During the voyage, when the curious and suspicious sailors open the bag, thinking it contains treasure, the evil winds roar up into hurricanes that blow the ships back to Aeolia. Aeolus drives them away again.

On the island of the Laestrygonians (le-strig-n’-on-eez), gigantic cannibals, all the ships but one are destroyed and their crews devoured. Odysseus’s ship escapes and lands on Aeaon, the home of the enchantress and goddess Circe. Here a party of twenty-three men, led by Eurylochus, goes off to explore the island. Odysseus is still telling his story to Alcinous and his court.

"In the wild wood they found an open glade, around a smooth stone house—the hall of Circe—and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil. None would attack—oh, it was strange, I tell you—but switching their long tails they faced our men like hounds, who look up when their master comes with tidbits for them—as he will—from table. Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes and feared them.

In the entranceway they stayed to listen there; inside her quiet house they heard the goddess Circe.

Low she sang in her beguiling voice, while on her loom she wove ambrosial fabric sheer and bright, by that craft known to the goddesses of heaven.

No one would speak, until Polites—most faithful and likeable of my officers—said: 'Dear friends, no need for stealth' here's a young weaver singing a pretty song to set the air atingle on these lawns and paven courts.

Goddes she is, or lady. Shall we greet her?' So reassured, they all cried out together, and she came swiftly to the shining doors to call them in. All but Eurylochus—who feared a snare—the innocents went after her.
On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs,
while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley
and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine,*
adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose
desire or thought of our dear fatherland.

Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—
bulldoors, voices, heads, and bristles, all
swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.
So, squalling, in they went. And Circe tossed them
acorns, mast,** and coxcomb berries—fodder
for hogs who rut and slumber on the earth.

Down to the ship Eurylochus came running
to cry alarm, foul magic doomed his men!
But working with dry lips to speak a word
he could not, being so shaken; blinding tears
welled in his eyes; foreboding filled his heart.
When we were frantic questioning him, at last
we heard the tale: our friends were gone... . .

(from Book 10)


575. mast n.: various kinds of nuts used as food for hogs.

549-583. Noto not to respond to this horrible experience. What have the men done to deserve being turned into pigs? How does Circe violate the laws of hospitality?

The Land of the Dead

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks to learn his destiny. The source of his information is Telemachus, the famous blind prophet from the city of Thebes. The prophet's lack of external sight suggests the presence of true insight. Circe has told Odysseus exactly what rites he must perform to bring Telemachus up from the dead. Odysseus continues telling his story to Alcmene's court.

"Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead,
vowing to slaughter my best helper for them
before he calved, at home in Ithaca,
and burn the choice bits on the altar fire;
as for Telemachus, I swore to sacrifice
a black lamb, handsomest of all our flock.

Thus to assuage the nations of the dead
I pledged these rites, then slashed the lamb and ewe,
letting their black blood stream into the well pit.
Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebus,
brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,
and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;
many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.

(Reference: Book 10)
From every side they came and sought the pit
with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.
But presently I gave command to my officers
to stay those sheep, the bronze cut down, and make
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—
to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone."

Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
the surging phantoms from the bloody pit
till I should know the presence of Teiresias . . .

Soon from the dark that prince of Thebes came forward
bearing a golden staff; and he addressed me:

'Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master of landways and seaways,
why leave the blazing sun, O man of woe,
to see the cold dead and the joyless region?
Stand clear, put up your sword;
let me but taste of blood, I shall speak true.'

At this I stepped aside, and in the scabbard
let my long sword ring home to the pommel silver,
as he bent down to the somber blood. Then spoke
the prince of those with gift of speech:

'Great captain,
a fair wind and the honey lights of home
are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;

the god who thunders on the land prepares it,
not to be shaken from your track, implacable,
in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.
One narrow strait may take you through his blows:
denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.
When you make landfall on Thrinakias first
and quit the violet sea, dark on the land
you'll find the grazing herds of Helios
by whom all things are seen, all speech is known.
Avoid those kine," hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
But if you raid the beehives," I see destruction
for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,
benefit of all companions, lost for years,
under strange sail shall you come home, to find
your own house filled with trouble: insolent men
eating your livestock as they court your lady.
Aye, you shall make those men stone in blood!
But after you have dealt out death—in open
combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,
goes overland on foot, and take an oar,
until one day you come where men have lived
with meat unsalted, never known the sea,
nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows
and oars that float light hulls for dipping flight.
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I
can tell you how: some passerby will say,
"What winnowing fan" is that upon your shoulder?"
Halit, and implant your smooth oar in the turf
and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:
a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,
and carry out pure hecatombs" at home
for all wide heaven's lords, the unying gods,
to each in order. Then a seaborne death
soft as this hand of mist will come upon you
when you are weared out with rich old age,
your countryfolk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell!' . . .''

(Vocabulary)

1. rancor (ran'kar) n. bitter hatred; ill will.