

The Cyclops in the Ocean

Nikki Giovanni

Moving slowly . . . against time . . . patiently majestic . . .
the cyclops . . . in the ocean . . . meets no Ulysses . . .

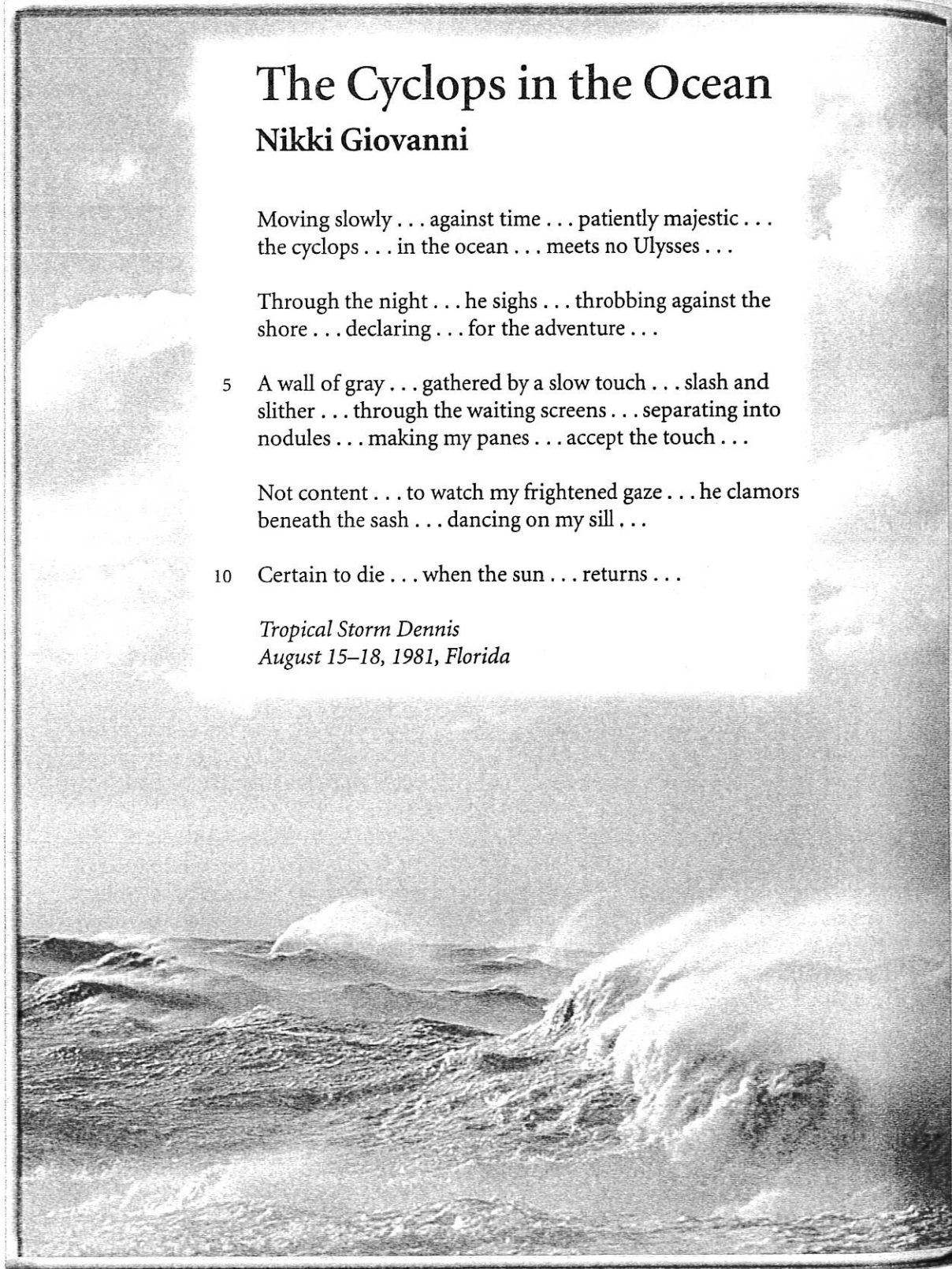
Through the night . . . he sighs . . . throbbing against the
shore . . . declaring . . . for the adventure . . .

5 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 . . .

10 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 (ē'ā·lās), does Odysseus a favor. He puts all the stormy winds in a bag so that they will not harm the Ithacans. The bull'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 (les·trig·ō'nē·ənz), gigantic cannibals, all the ships but one are destroyed and their crews devoured. Odysseus's ship escapes and lands on Aeaea, 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.

540 "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
545 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
550 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.
555 No one would speak, until Polites^o—most
faithful and likable of my officers—said:

'Dear friends, no need for stealth:^o here's a young weaver
singing a pretty song to set the air
atingle on these lawns and paven courts.
560 Goddess 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.



Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

Pigs, swineherd, and Odysseus by the Pig Painter. Pelike, or jar (470–460 B.C.).

555. **Polites** (pō·li'tēz').

557. **stealth** (stelh) *n.*: sneaky behavior.



Circe offers the magic potion to Odysseus. Detail from Greek vase from Thebes. British Museum, London.

565 On thrones she seated them, and lounging chairs,
while she prepared a meal of cheese and barley
and amber honey mixed with Pramnian wine,^o
adding her own vile pinch, to make them lose
desire or thought of our dear fatherland.

570 Scarce had they drunk when she flew after them
with her long stick and shut them in a pigsty—
bodies, voices, heads, and bristles, all
swinish now, though minds were still unchanged.
So, squealing, in they went. And Circe tossed them


575 acorns, mast,^o and cornel 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
580 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)

567. **Pramnian wine:** strong wine from Mount Pramnos in ancient Greece.

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

 549–583. Note your responses to this horrible experience. What have the men done to deserve being turned into pigs? How does Circe violate the laws of hospitality?

Odysseus leaves the ship and rushes to Circe’s hall. The god Hermes stops him to give him a plant that will weaken Circe’s power. (Homer calls it a moly; it might have been a kind of garlic.) Protected by the plant’s magic, Odysseus resists Circe’s sorcery. The goddess, realizing she has met her match, frees Odysseus’s men. Now Circe, “loveliest of all immortals,” persuades Odysseus to stay with her. Odysseus shares her meat and wine, and she restores his heart. After many seasons of feasting and other pleasures, Odysseus and his men beg Circe to help them return home.

She responds to their pleas with the command that Odysseus alone descend to the Land of the Dead, “the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone,” queen of the underworld. There Odysseus must seek the wisdom of the blind prophet Teiresias.

Odysseus pursuing Circe. Greek vase. Louvre, Paris, France.



THE LAND OF THE DEAD

In the Land of the Dead, Odysseus seeks to learn his destiny. The source of his information is Teiresias, 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 Teiresias up from the dead. Odysseus continues telling his story to Alcinous’s court.

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

590 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;

595 many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.

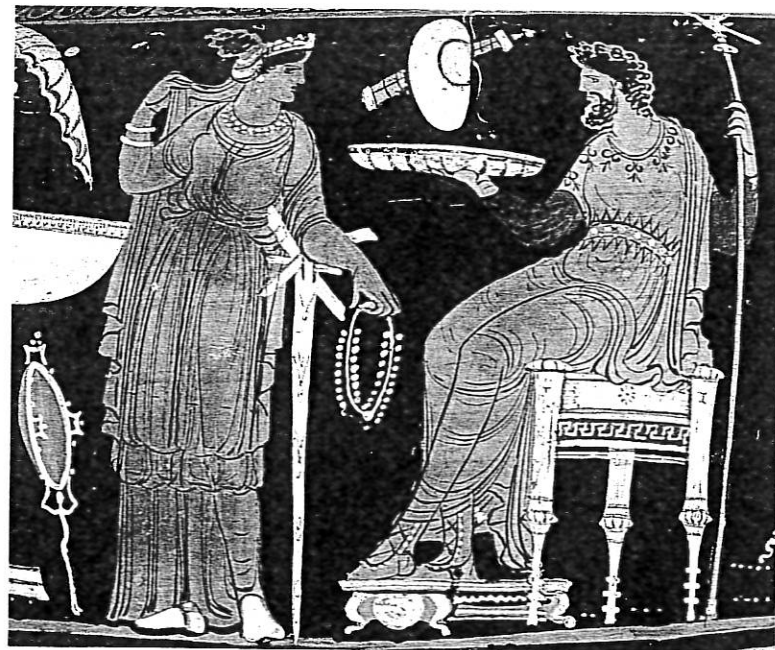
From every side they came and sought the pit
with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear.
600 But presently I gave command to my officers
to flay^o those sheep the bronze cut down, and make
burnt offerings of flesh to the gods below—
to sovereign Death, to pale Persephone.^o
Meanwhile I crouched with my drawn sword to keep
605 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,
610 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.’

615 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
620 are all you seek. But anguish lies ahead;



Persephone, queen of the underworld, with her husband, Hades (4th century B.C.). British Museum, London.

601. flay (flā) *v.*: strip the skin from.

603. Persephone (pəɹ·sef'ə·nē).

the god who thunders on the land prepares it,
not to be shaken from your track, implacable,^o
in rancor for the son whose eye you blinded.
One narrow strait may take you through his blows:
625 denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.
When you make landfall on Thrinakia 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.
630 Avoid those kine,^o hold fast to your intent,
and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca.
But if you raid the beeves,^o I see destruction
for ship and crew. Though you survive alone,
bereft of all companions, lost for years,
635 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 atone in blood!
But after you have dealt out death—in open
640 combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,
go 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
645 and oars that fledge 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^o is that upon your shoulder?”
Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf
650 and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:
a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,
and carry out pure hecatombs^o at home
to all wide heaven's lords, the undying gods,
to each in order. Then a seaborne death
655 soft as this hand of mist will come upon you
when you are wearied out with rich old age,
your countryfolk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell. . . .”

(from Book 11)

Vocabulary

rancor (raŋ'kər) *n.*: bitter hatred; ill will.


622. **implacable** (im·plak'ə·bəl)
adj.: unyielding; merciless.

630. **kine** (kīn) *n.*: old term for
“cattle.”

632. **beeves** *n.*: another old term for
“cattle.”

648. **winnowing fan**: device used to
remove the useless dry outer covering
from grain. (These people would
never have seen an oar.)

652. **hecatombs** (hek'ə·tōmz') *n.*:
sacrifices of one hundred cattle at a
time to the gods. In Greek, *hecaton*
means “one hundred.”

 618–658. What prophecy
does Odysseus receive? Take notes on
how you might film this important
scene in the underworld. How many
actors would you need? What props
would you use? You might sketch the
scene as you visualize it.