

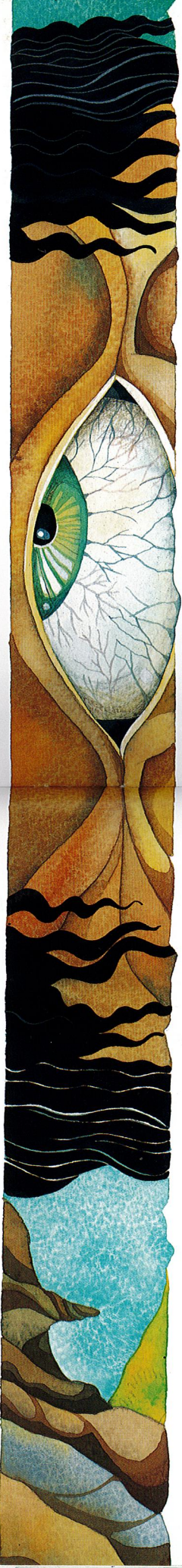
2 • THE CYCLOPS •

For many days we sailed until we reached an island that seemed to us a paradise. We saw land, level for the plough, fat sheep and goats grazing.

We decided to stop and take on fresh meat and water. We beached the ship. I told twelve of my men to take from the treasures of Troy some precious thing, some bracelet or brooch, in the hope that we would find people with whom we could barter. I took a goatskin of strong wine. One cupful poured into a barrel of water would still make a potent potion.

We followed a path from the beach to a hill. In the hill there was a cave. Beside the cave there was a boulder that looked as though it had been placed there for some purpose. Perhaps this cave was a home. Sure enough, when we went inside we found enclosures with fences which held lambs and kids. We found buckets of cheese and milk. Whose home was this? We squatted by a fire, munched some cheese, drank some milk, sat back and waited.





Eventually we heard bleating. A great flock of animals was approaching. Something — perhaps a premonition — made me instruct my men to hide in the darkest part of the cave. A huge herd of sheep and goats entered and gathered near their young.

Then, behind them, we saw a silhouette in the cave mouth. It was the shape of a man, but this was bigger than any man we had ever seen. It was the size of a tall tree. It lumbered in, grabbed the boulder and rolled it into the entrance. Now the only light came from the fire. By the light of the flames we watched the giant milk the female sheep and goats with surprising tenderness and obvious affection. We studied its tusk-like teeth and its snout of a nose. In the middle of its forehead there was one enormous eye.

By the light of the fire he must have seen our shadows on the wall behind us. He said, 'What's this? I have guests! Little two-eyed things!'

We stepped forward. 'We are men. We have here precious treasures. We want to swap them with you for meat

and fresh water. Father God Zeus rewards those who are kind to travellers.'

'Zeus? Don't you know what I am? I am a Cyclops. We Cyclopes are the sons of the Sea God Poseidon. We have no fear of your blustering Zeus!'

Then the Cyclops grabbed one of my men and smacked his head against the roof of the cave. His brains splattered against the walls and the floor. He crammed the corpse into his mouth.

We were horrified. Before he could devour another of my men I held up the skin of strong wine. 'We little two-eyes have made something you one-eyes have not. It is drink that makes you happy. If I give it to you, would you give me a gift in return?'

'Give me your gift, and I will give you an answer!'

I threw the wineskin to his feet. He picked it up, took the stopper from it and emptied it in one long gulp. He threw it to the ground.

'What is your name?' he asked.

'My name? My name is Nobody.'

'Well, then, Nobody, I thank you for your gift. It tasted good. In return I will give something precious: a little more life. I promise you will be the last one that I eat!'

He grabbed another one of my men and bit off his head.

As the Cyclops chewed his cheeks reddened. His great eyelids met. He put out his hand to steady himself. The wine was taking effect. Soon he lay on the ground, his cheek against the sand, his eye shut, his mouth open, dripping blood and wine.

One of my crew drew his sword and stepped forward, intending to plunge the blade through the Cyclops's skin and kill him as he slept. I had to restrain him. The Cyclops was our only means of escape. All of us together weren't strong enough to push the rock from the cave mouth. We were trapped until this brute freed us.

All that night we searched the cave. We found the trunk of an olive tree that the Cyclops was drying to use as a

shepherd's crook. We drew our swords and whittled at it until it came to a sharp point. We put the point into the fire, until it glowed red-hot. We lifted the tree trunk on to our shoulders, and, urging each other on, we ran forwards and plunged the point into his eye, twisting it from side to side as we did so. Steam rose up around the wood. The Cyclops gave an awful yell. He reared up and pulled the wood from his head with a sucking sound. The scream summoned other Cyclopes from nearby caves. We could hear them shouting through the boulder, 'Polyphemus, what's the matter?'

'I have been blinded!'

'Who has blinded you?'

'Nobody! Nobody has blinded me!'

'If nobody has blinded you, there's nothing we can do to help you. It must be a punishment from the immortals! Pray to them and your sight will be restored to you!' And so the other Cyclopes went back to their caves and their slumbers.



All that night we played a terrible game of blind man's buff with Polyphemus.

He felt his way around the walls of the cave, uttering threats and insults, the blood dripping from his chin. We ducked under his swooping hands. Eventually, when the animals' bleating alerted the Cyclops to the coming of the day, he felt his way along the walls of the cave until he touched the boulder that blocked the cave mouth. He pushed it out.

He turned and squatted in the entrance, his back protruding out of the cave and his legs apart. He felt across the floor until he found the fences. He opened them and the flock made its way out to graze. Of course, they had to pass through his legs and under him. As they did so he ran his fingers over their backs. Polyphemus was hoping we would try to escape by hiding among them. He was hoping he would recognise us by our human shape and pull us limb from limb. But I had guessed he would do this.


During the night my companions and I had tied the sheep together, in rows of three, one beside the other. Then each of my men had slid under the belly of the middle sheep,

and I had tied him beneath the animal. When the Cyclops ran his hands over the sheep, all he felt was the wool of their backs. In this way my men escaped. Only I remained. I had held back a great curly-horned ram. Now I slid under its belly, reached up and grabbed the wool on its neck. I shook it. The ram trotted towards Polyphemus. He touched its horns.

His fingers closed around the ram's head. The ram stopped. The Cyclops said, 'I know you. You are the chief of the herd. Every morning you are the first to leave the cave. And yet today, when all the others have gone, you linger. Why?'

Under the ram I was sure that my heart was beating so loudly that the Cyclops would hear it. Then I heard him say, 'I know why. Somehow you know that I am suffering, don't you? You want to stay with me, and console me with your company. But there is nothing you can do. I am blind now. You must go and graze with your companions.'

He released the beast. It trotted out into the daylight. I was free! I untied my men and we herded the sheep down to the ship. We made the water white with the blades of



our oars. I looked back at this island that so recently had seemed to us a paradise. I could see the hill and the cave. I could see the Cyclops in the cave entrance. He was still waiting for us to make our move. And I couldn't stop myself. I had to gloat.

'Polyphemus! It was not Nobody who blinded you! It was somebody! It was Odysseus! A ram among sheep! King of rocky Ithaca! Remember my name for the rest of your life of stumbling darkness!'

'Father Poseidon! Did you hear his name? It was Odysseus who blinded your son. Blight his voyage with trial and calamity, so that if at last he reaches his homeland, let it be alone, and unknown, and under a strange sail, and let him find danger waiting where there should be a welcome!'

I laughed at the Cyclops's ranting, but my gloating would cost us dearly . . .