

DESERT ODYSSEY, FEBRUARY, 1991

This endless sea is dry, its wavy crests
designed of sand, its granulated tides
eternally unscheduled, owned by wind.
Or gravity when overburdened heights
slide down a concave swell. And now disturbed
by men in motion and their weaponry,
A mortar shell will spew a mighty splash.
A hole fills up like leakage in a bilge.

Could be the desert has its own Poseidon.
And if he chose this realm for peaceful rest,
his hideaway for secret meditation,
he's now incensed at savage noisy lights
that rip the dark and craze the blistered sky.
If so, this god must be enraged enough
to pour his bile on mortals setting fires
that char the clouds, and blasts that crater hell.

My own seaworthy ship: a tank with eyes
to leap horizons, pierce the dark and relay
images Athena couldn't conjure up.
My crew is trained but none is battle wise
like those Odysseus commanded once.
I make myself no such comparison,
no hero. No enchanted sojourns, nymphs
or ogres-- ah well, maybe counting colonels--

My Army unit got called up and here
I am, late of a college classroom where
I taught the classics: Homer, Virgil, Dante,
themselves no strangers to the Fates and war.
And like all men who fight on foreign ground,
I wonder when I'll see my wife and home.
Professional professor, weekend soldier
for years-- no incongruity in that--

If one exists, it's in the harpist there
on my right flank, the best damn driver here.
A tank-jock's normally a tougher cut
than he who plays as if retained from childhood
to grace Hellenic halls and royal feasts
with Meneláus praising his sweet hands--
those proven hands that bully steel and heat,
commanding his big thunderbitch with verve.

Deployed in battle line, my bulky fleet
of blunt and roaring vessels sailing sand
is on alert. Our thermal sights blip full.
Identified as enemy, I still
beg instruments for every shred of knowing.
These guns make pale Lord Zeus's lightning bolts,
make trash of other tanks. Our radios
have words. The column is approaching fast.