

DESERT ODYSSEY, THEN and NOW

That endless sea was dry: its wavy crests
Designed of sand, its granulated tides
Eternally unscheduled, owned by wind
Or gravity when overburdened heights
Slid down a concave swell. Or when disturbed
By men in motion and their weaponry.
A mortar shell would spew a mighty splash.
The hole filled up like leakage in a bilge.

Could be the desert has its own Poseidon.
And if he chose that realm for peaceful rest,
His hideaway for secret meditation,
He's still incensed at those first noisy lights
That ripped the dark and crazed the blistered sky.
No doubt the god remained enraged enough
To heap more bile on mortals who set fires
That charred the clouds, and blasts that cratered hell.

My own seaworthy ship: a tank with eyes
To leap horizons, pierce the dark and relay
Images Athena couldn't conjure.
My crew was trained but none was battle-wise
As those who followed brave Odysseus.
I made myself no such comparison,
No hero. No enchanted sojourns, nymphs
Or ogres— ah well, maybe counting colonels—

My Army unit got called up and there
I was, 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 wondered when I'd see my wife and home.
Professional professor, weekend warrior
For years— no incongruity in that.

And always on my right flank was the harpist,
Young and handsome, best damn driver there.
A tank-jock's normally a tougher cut
Than he who played as if retained for life
To grace Hellenic halls and royal feasts
With Menelaus praising his sweet hands—
Those proven hands that bullied steel and heat,
Commanding his big thunderbitch with verve.

Deployed in battle line, my bulky fleet
Of blunt and roaring vessels sailing sand
Was on alert. Our thermal sights blipped full.
Identified as enemy, I still
Begged instruments for every shred of knowing.
Those guns made pale Lord Zeus's lightning bolts,
Made trash of other tanks. Our radios
Had words. The column was²⁰⁹ approaching fast.