

DESERT ODYSSEY, 1991... AND STILL...

This dreaded 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,
The 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,
His anger rose at those first noisy lights
That ripped the dark and crazed the blistered sky.
By now, the 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.
My crew is trained but none is battle-wise
As those who followed brave Odysseus.
I make myself no such comparison,
No hero. No enchanted sojourns, nymphs
Or ogres-- ah well, maybe counting colonels.

Eng-Lit professor, weekend warrior
For years-- small incongruity in that.
My Army unit called me up and shipped
Me out, late of a college classroom where
I taught the classics: Homer, Virgil, Dante,
Themselves no strangers to the Fates and Strife.
And like most men who fight on foreign ground,
The mind survives on memories of home.

(cont.)

And always on my right flank was the harpist,
 Young, but best damn driver in the Corps.
 A tank-jock's normally a tougher cut
 Than he who played as if retained for life
 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.
 My guns made pale Lord Zeus's lightning bolts,
 Made trash of other tanks. Our radios
 Had words. The column was approaching fast.

I gave the order to destroy the targets.
 Incredible the way our rounds homed toward
 Their marks, made tracks and turrets flash and roar.
 Grey-eyed Athena gasped, her aegis high
 Above the rubble, sending us a hawk,
 A grey-backed raptor screeching victory.
 Her cloud expanded slower than our eyes.
 My crew racked up their scores like arcade games.

In twenty minutes, wounded men arrived.
 Elation dwindled in a grinding pall;
 We watched as one man fumbled on his way
 As if to hide a pistol in his sleeve.
 On closer look, he held his severed arm
 And died beside my tank as others groaned.
 Two more made wine-dark seas with their own blood.
 Iraqi armored troops surrendering.

Back on patrol at dawn, that goddess glowed;
 Homeric rosy fingers earned their poems.
 The crews were sobered, combat had its bite.
 Then animated sights required decisions.
 The shapes we read were not exact enough
 To leave no doubt. But if we held off long
 We'd be within their range. Commanders all
 Have grappled that chimera in their craws.

(cont.)

N.

Odyssey

"Sweet Jesus, Cap'n

"Sweet Jesus, Cap'n, time we oughta shoot!"
 My gunner cried, a black Telémachus,
 His tongue undone, his trigger in control.
 The radio confirmed no other tanks
 Of ours were in the sector. No more choice,
 Our time ran out. I ordered the attack.
 How many gods had we provoked? I prayed,
 Please my dear God, don't let us torch our own!

As images exploded we heard words:
 An error! Static. Curses. "Hold your fire!"
 We hit two U.S. tanks, off course for hours.
 No one survived our deadly friendly blasts.
 I could not break. I kept my men from breaking.
 Penelopes would learn their wait was done.
 And who explained such useless costs to them?
 And in this world who can explain to me?

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It seems just months ago, those scenes more real
 Than now. Yet over eighteen years have passed,
 My journal's pages yellowing, my mental
 Log still clear. I start another chapter.
 I'm in administration now, an aim
 At peaceful order. Just before I left,
 My students asked unanswered WHYS of me
 And Homer's "man of many wiles." Like him,
 I can't convince myself of what is right
 Or justified, what we have saved or bettered.

No end in sight, and here I fight again
 Sans tanks-- a stranger battle, secret foes.
 The desert is unchanged as are the questions
 Killing never solves and never stills.
 The face of war is veiled, unrecognized,
 Unseen for several days or weeks. Until
 The scrim of normalcy is jolted, shattered.
 Markets, bookstalls, offices or mosques
 Will instantly turn into flying chunks
 Of wood and metal, concrete, flesh and bone.

(cont.)

Some ordinary place of common sights
 Will vanish in a martyr's zeal. Another
 Jeep dismembered, human limbs strewn on
 The road with burning stuff once part of life,
 The incidental noncombatants, children,
 Some unborn, the innocent, the old,
 All offered up to make a pointless point.

Jihad condones the things believers do.
 Beneath a belt, a burkha, wagon seat,
 A bag of rice, or maybe just a fist
 Are instruments of death awaiting victims.
 A corpsman's corpse, a legless female sergeant
 In the dirt await evacuation.

No end in sight, and we are here again
 Supposed to halt destruction and dissension,
 Ancient hates and fears with origins
 In Ishmael and Isaac, both from seed
 Of Abraham. Will God provide a new
 Genetic pool with wisdom? Are we destined
 To repeat the carnage endlessly?

Some days seem almost tranquil, but the brain,
 The gut too long rehearsed in damages,
 Refutes all hopeful thoughts, recalling how
 The enemy will use a slight relaxing
 For a chance to blow another bomb.
 In June I learned the harpist reenlisted.
 We planned to get together but before
 We could, he occupied a body bag.

Baghdad Mosul Basra Kirkuk Sunni
 Shia Bathist places people isms,
 Incompatible beliefs, ambitions,
 Needs. And none about to change a word
 Of text or texture in a shredded land.
 No desert spring can quench my raging thirst,
 No river make my body clean, untainted.
 The waters here are vile with rot and blood.

(cont.)

I found myself in Homer's verse, evaded
Many times, now inescapable:
"Before the end my heart was broken down.
I slumped on trampled sand and cried aloud,
Caring no more for life or light of day,
And rolled there weeping till my tears were spent."

A BOWL OF BLUE BLOSSOMS

My delphiniums budded, dolphin-shaped sucklings
nursing on light, turning light to pigment,
demanding of me a worthy container,
a competent complement for blue.

Glass-vased cosmos, bland and blueless, watched
as my bowl began-- a fat gray coil of earth,
cold-slimy to my touch, reluctant to accept
my warmth or my will. I insisted a deep reservoir

to prolong blue. Free of my hands, it rearranged
its molecules slowly, making no promises,
shrinking fossil-dry on a shelf. Its dark hollow,
encased in continental crust, lusted for light.

Graduated from the first fire, country coarse
as big bucktoothed zinnias in baskets in my studio,
its rough apprentice-brown drank deeply of unguents.
Native manganese and copper anointed its flaws.

In a final revelation it vibrated like a nova,
orange to white in my kiln, healed and ripened
in hereditary heat on its way to indigo. Settled
down with the world's glazed memories of sky and sea,

it came into its own first flowering today,
paired with now-pollinated sisters of the soil.
Their soft spurs brush its flanks in approval
as they share the blue planet's most perfected blue.