

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 yet 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 Menelaus 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.

I give the order to destroy the targets.  
Incredible the way our rounds locate  
their marks, make tracks and turrets spin and fly.  
Grey-eyed Athena gasps, her aegis high  
above the rubble, sending us a hawk,  
a grey-backed raptor screeching victory.  
Her cloud expands more slowly than our eyes.  
My crew exults in scores like arcade games.

In thirty minutes, wounded men arrive.  
Elation dwindles in a grinding pall;  
we watch as one man fumbles on his way  
as if to hide a pistol in his sleeve.  
On closer look, he holds his severed arm  
and dies beside my tank as others groan.  
Two more make winedark seas with their own blood,  
Iraqi armored troops, surrendering.

This ocean's wretched wrack clings to our wake  
as silica Poseidon watches, waits  
astride an Arab horse or camel hump?  
Avenger riding on the tidal dunes  
and hard-caked flats nailed down with tons of light.  
Without a trident, does he wield a spade,  
this unknown deity whose angst we rasp?  
What sacrifice will he require of us?

Back on patrol at dawn, the goddess glows;  
Homeric rosy fingers earn their poems.  
The crews are sobered from the bite of combat.  
Now, animated sights demand decisions.  
The shapes we read are not precise enough  
to leave no doubt. But if we wait too long  
then we'll be in their range. Commanders all  
have grappled this chimera in their craws.

"Sweet Jesus, Cap'n, time we oughta shoot!"  
the gunner cries, a blonde Telémakhos,  
his tongue undone, his trigger in control.  
The radio confirms no other tanks  
of ours are in this sector. No more choice,  
our time runs out, I order the attack.  
How many gods and men have we provoked?  
Please my dear God, don't let us torch our own!

As images explode we hear the news.  
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 must not break, must keep my men from breaking.  
Penelopes must learn they wait in vain.  
And who explains such useless costs to them?  
And in this world who can explain to me?



TORERO

Great images. Lots of them.  
I underlined some of the  
ones I liked best.

Incarnadine dawn came before Santos slept.  
Day of the corrida!  
A dark mountain sprouting stiff yellow flowers  
and reverberating thunder waited behind his eyelids.  
He must strike lightning into a certain crater  
between the damp ridges  
before thunder passed him through.

Early to the rites of preparation, steeping  
in the vow to avenge his brother Miguel.  
Long prayer before the Virgin. Hot laughter  
with his comrades, fear encased in brocade,  
superstition covered with colors of scorn.  
He had even secretly looked at his bulls. The breeder  
told him one was twin to the hooking horn-wise engine  
that routed Miguel's soul with a splintered thrust.

Last notes of La Virgen de la Macarena flared  
from trumpets, eddied through the heat  
in Santos's head. Shrill corkscrews pulled  
the cuadrillas into the circle of ferret eyes.  
A thousand prisms paving his shoulders ignited  
in dusty sun. The circle hailed his name, caressed it,  
intimate as a lover with the sound of it.  
Something else--treble breeze perhaps, pitched  
to the trumpets--hissed his name, paced his march step,  
clung to the afterbeat. The two flashing semaphores  
beside him were silent, fierce-smiling  
their aficionado faces. His name wound back  
in the bell of a horn or the wind's mouth.  
The musicians played with too much pathos today.  
It was better when they blasted, pompous and bawdy,  
like ponderous heralds of Caesar.

"Dios, we have a gale," growled an assistant.  
"We will have to drown the capes!" The wind examined  
the folded bright colors, the hair of men and horses.  
"Don't work so close, Santos," his banderillero pleaded.  
"You don't have to paint your belly  
with the bull's blood. You're here. It is enough."  
Layers of eyes probed Santos's pores;  
the wind stuttered his name. He made no reply.

Santos did not hear hoofs pulverizing sand,  
sounds of the watered cape, the olés. His first bull  
was a mountain, an armed freight train,  
the blood-mate to Miguel's damaged and devious one.  
But this bull was honest, boldly magnificent, like one  
his grandfather once spoke of, spared by the wishes  
of an admiring crowd. Never to happen again.  
Santos heard only wind instruments deciding his dance,  
humming his mind like wires, then the racking force  
of his will arcing the ring, entering the pic,  
bracing it against the picador's old sin  
of twisting, and stealing the best of his bull.