

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. Sometimes disturbed
by men in motion or 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.

(cont.)

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
eight 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 birth
to grace Hellenic halls and royal feasts
with Menelaus praising his sweet hands--
those proven hands that bully steel and heat,
controlling his big thunderbitch with class.

(cont.)

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.

(cont.)