

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.

I gave the order to destroy the targets.
 Incredible the way our rounds homed toward
 Their marks, made tracks and turrets flash and soar.
 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 thirty 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, the 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 precisely in their range. Commanders all
 Have grappled that chimera in their craws.

"Sweet Jesus, Cap'n, time we oughta shoot!"
 My gunner cried, a blond Telemachus,
 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 were told their wait was done.
 And who explained such useless costs to them?
 And in this world, who can explain to me?

Last year I had a letter from the harpist.
 Like mine, his children dreaded further war.
 My students asked unanswered questions daily.
 What Muse would guide us through the final course?
 We studied Homer's "man of many wiles."
 And could he in the end persuade himself
 Of what was justified? What learned or gained?

Like why we're here to do it all again?