

## DESERT ODYSSEY, FEBRUARY, 1991

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 savage noisy lights  
 That ripped the dark and crazed the blistered sky.  
 Could be the god is still 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 up.  
 My crew was trained but none was 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--

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 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 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 Telemakhos,  
 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 over.  
 And who explains such useless costs to them?  
 And in this world, who can explain to me?

Today I had a letter from the harpist--  
 Who earned a medal in a later battle.  
 His children fear he'll leave them for a war.  
 My students ask unanswered questions daily.  
 Muse, tell me of the "man of many wiles,"  
 And could he in the end persuade himself  
 Of what was justified? What learned or gained?  
 Must we go back and do it all once more?