

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.