

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 now 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 Meneláus 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 flash and soar.
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 wine dark 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 light.
Without a trident, does he wield a spade,
this unknown deity whose spleen 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!"
my gunner cries, a blond 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?

"Before the end my heart was broken down.
I slumped on trampled sand and cried aloud,
caring no more for life or the light of day,
and rolled there weeping, till my tears were spent."
--The Odyssey, Book IV, translated by Robert Fitzgerald