

A Wake on the Santa Barbara Pier

by Thomas J. Scheff (May 2010)

Sundays the tourists, seeking cheer,

stroll on our local pier.

They pass, in plain view

A memorial quite new

for our soldiers who died

in the war against Iraq this year:

Sunday mornings we vets install

A mock cemetery with three thousand crosses,

And take it down Sunday nights,

Sisyphus-like, a moveable bier.

Laid out like a real graveyard,

it covers the beach

to the right of the pier.

We are in the sand by the pier,

talking with those who come near.

Most either don't look,

As if in a trance,

or give only a sidelong glance.

But many stop, look at the crosses far and near

then at the books of the dead

Laid out as leaves on our railing,

beside the rail of the pier.

They look at me, puzzled. "Which war?"

"Iraq." I say. Which war!

Some leave at this point.

Most, though, look again

at the names of the dead.

“What for?”

“To honor our dead.” I say.
Beside the rail of our pier
They take their first long look,
The tumblers roll open a lock.

I can see in their faces
Signs of surprise, grief or shock.
They wake to a thought
like a line from T.S. Eliot

Who borrowed it from Dante: