

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