

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?