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 Telemachus,
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 done.
And who explained such useless costs to them?
And in this world, who can explain to me?

Last year I had a letter from the harpist.
Like mine, his children dreaded further war.
My students asked unanswered questions daily.
What Muse would guide us through the final course?
We studied Homer's "man of many wiles."
And could he in the end persuade himself
Of what was justified? What learned or gained?

Like why we're here to do it all again?

300

--G. R. Holloway