

As I Flick Off The Remote In The Gulf I Think Of An Ancient Greek Playwright

In mem. James Wright

*At home the same things happened.
Women were widowed, then died.
Parents shuffle through empty rooms
Without the sons they loved.
Our troops have earned this praise
in our name, and we must shut up
about such acts of shame.*

– Euripides, Trojan Women, 379-384

Euripides, with your scalpel pity and your songs,
who watched from exile in Macedonia, 403 BC,
that city where you spoke out against massacre
(blowing up the allies, for God's sake!)
sizzle in turn, the Long Walls pulled down –

you who were torn to pieces on a goat-track
by dogs – what's the use? I think of you
walking in dapply oak forests of the north
where feather-fetlocked war-stallions
are grazing meadows
which Athenian yeomen, blunting their hoes
on rockfields, would kill to cultivate.

You imagine, as you hike,
a baby-faced stranger. A god with cinnamon
sideburns, ivy sap leaking through
his microtonal 'oud, entering every city alike:
barbarian, Greek, twin-towered, devout.

But this is March 2006. I'm on the edge of a bed
among cappuccino shadows of afternoon
in the freezing cold Mövenpick Hotel. Bahrain.
100 degrees outside, and the Manager can't turn off
the air conditioning, no one can. Cement roofs roil
up and down, up and down, far as the eye
can see. Caramel domes and a salmoning sky

in the first Gulf State to find oil.
I'm watching the President of Iran
in ivory denim conduct a dance
of seven ministers on CNN.
They hop in celebration. Old men,

round and again round a desk of microphones
like the crown of stalwart hills and radio masts
about a holy city. They have enriched plutonium!
Do they feel a touch ridiculous too?
Representatives of other Arab states,
plus my friends downstairs, are all calm.

No big deal, no cause for alarm. But Washington
is talking of war. Another Abu Ghraib? Euripides,
whose microtones I lived in a long strange while:
where are your arguments now –
that frayed silk rope of human, divine,
and the same rules applying to all?