

Ramp Ceremony

—Virgil Huston

Three soldiers died this morning,
I saw the medevacs come in
Much later, we heard
what happened—
A firefight and IEDs,
There were wounded, too
Sergeant Major came to see me
Another ramp ceremony,
on the LZ tonight—

We started gathering early,
while the day was still alive
A crescent moon in the dimming afternoon
Soldiers setting up the stage
on that same landing zone,
where the medevacs had landed—
just a podium and some chemlights,
it will be dark tonight—

We started forming up,
crescent moon rising still
US Army, Polish soldiers,
civilians in the line—
As darkness fell completely,
we waited in the gloom
The sound of Blackhawk engines,

across the sky coming in to land—

Chopper noise—

all we could hear—

Suddenly, searchlights took us

by surprise—

Finally, we could see

amid the noise and dust—

Together they lowered down

And waited for their riders,

brave soldiers three—

With rotors turning still,

the ceremony began—

We could barely hear the sermon,

or that last roll call—

And when they did not answer,

they were stricken from the roll—

Headlights approaching

from behind eerily,

we are called to attention.

Two ambulances head down,

the glowing chemlight trail

The formation salutes

as the vehicles pass us by and

pull up to the Blackhawks,

door gunners saluting, too—

Waiting on the ground

Flag-draped cases slowly loaded on—

Now empty, ambulances back away
Just the Blackhawks left on
dusty, graveled ground—
The crew does its checks,
climbs in and closes the door—

Engines revving, they rise up,
perfectly synchronized
move on out, searchlights beaming
As they clear this tiny base—

Plunged back into darkness,
we hear them as they go—
The sound fades—
Quiet on the line
Not a dry eye that night—

Those soldiers saw the rising dawn,
but not the setting sun—
Their last patrol—
Those of us still standing
knew it could just
as easily have been us.