The Helicopters Came
—Michael Lythgoe

Back in the Mekong Delta, ’65:
I am airborne in a helicopter
looking down on Vietnamese Rangers;
battalion attacks Viet Cong, rice paddy.
I fly safe—above the ground-fire; my squadron
skip-bombs napalm tanks, sticky jelly flames,
blue and yellow burns. Flashback: Jungle bleeds.
Commander speaks French words, Vietnamese.
I hear the Forward Air Controller clear
Super Sabres, “huns,” in flights of four;
my squadron’s call signs reply. Soldiers die.
I feel no pain, land safe in swamp and bamboo.
Today, another helicopter: painting is a blur,
an Iraqi’s art on a book cover.
A veteran’s poems on pages, inside, hover:
PTSD. VA Hospital. Wounded Warrior.
Our world is shaky. Agamemnon dies
over and over—Trojan Wars. Black clouds.
Plumes over bomb sites, corpses, battlefields;
helicopter flies over volcano erupting lava;
over glacier seen smoking from outer space.
Kandahar: IEDs are now the enemy,
not punji stakes, new booby traps. Poppy.
Different terrain. Same noise. Stryker explodes.
I feel the blades beat sand and palm trees.
I watch Predator crews in California control camera’s eye as missile kills.
In safety, I remember. Same shudders.

*A Stryker is an armored vehicle for troops.*