

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.