

E L I J A H I M L A Y

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## Deer Running Backwards

*Camp Eagle, Viet Nam, 1971*

1

*What kind of a name is that?*  
Too polite, I don't ask.  
Besides, I like how it sounds  
in his tongue,

like wind over water  
and water over stones.

He offers me a toke,  
the last of his Cambodian Red.  
*Better than whiskey or beer*, he says.  
*Drinking killed my dad.*

2

I crunch plastic coffins  
the size of my thumbnail,  
like snails after rain,  
on my way to the mess hall.  
Hundreds of them  
litter the walkways.  
I pick up one,

just large enough to carry  
the weight of a soul,  
and shake it.  
Empty.  
No white or yellow smack  
to snort or sell.

3

In the rock band hooch  
McKittrick uses a flame  
to warp amber vials  
before stringing them into necklaces.  
Lewis tests white powder  
on the tip of his tongue,  
nods, leans back, snorts,  
offers me some,  
says it's pure cut,  
no need for needles, and stopping  
is like a three day flu.

My eyes crawl down Swenson's bulging vein.  
*You can shoot the moon*, he says.  
His wide pupils  
are not like the ocean on a still night  
and do not flicker or sway beneath the stars.  
Someday nothing will remain  
of this except a rumor  
of a night without eyes or tongue.

4

Outside, my shadow grows vague  
as it lengthens into night.  
I follow it  
to where the sun stretches the horizon  
and the moon rises death-face-full.  
On the hilltop  
Deer Running Backwards  
smiles and stokes his pipe.

5

A week later  
a newly-in-country narc,  
his fair face untouched by sun or war,  
looks under rocks, in sheds,  
through our stuff.

Even the general grows poppies,  
but this guy can't find a thing.

6

Court martial proceedings begin.  
I'm ordered to stand guard outside.  
I object, *This isn't Saigon.*  
*Why am I here?*  
*There's an MP indoors*  
*and no place for this sucker to run.*

When he comes out in cuffs,  
I suck in hard.  
With men strung out on smack,  
they got Deer Running Backwards  
for smoking pot?

Off to Long Binh Jail  
for a few weeks, then one to five  
years at Leavenworth.  
One wrong move  
and they'll shoot him dead.

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**ELIJAH IMLAY'S** book, *Monsoon Blues*, is forthcoming from Tebot Bach Press. It recounts his experiences as an army bandsman at Camp Eagle, Viet Nam, 1971. Elijah's work appears in *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*. He's the recipient of three literary artist fellowships from the City of Ventura, a Pushcart nomination and a Tor House prize.