

MICHAEL PRIOR

Lines Written While Visiting the Valley Where the Camp Was

It happened here. RVs and summer homes.
 Salal clotting by the river.
A pair of black lungs' rotting petals
 on the back of a pack of Belmont Milds
half-buried in the reeds. If I try,
 I can crack the highway's asphalt,
lift it East across the valley, where it was
 when tarpaper shacks once rose
like mushrooms from the mud
 along the water—then deeper,
straighter, raked by winter wind
 into heaps of etched glass,
broken lines in which I might find
 a pair of sunken eyes, the grooves
of a forehead, slope of a nose,
 my grandmother leaning close
to crease a sheet of washi into a heart,
 a crane, a little frog; the little whisky
on my grandfather's breath the time
 he showed me how to swing a bat,
the way its momentum should point
 past home; or my mother
sobbing on the phone after I left mine in anger
 at nineteen. Like water
carried in cupped hands, all this was gone
 before I noticed. It persists
as motion rehearsed into muscle.
 I'm alone and tired of trying
to summon years from the valley's blue-green
 shadows, the white-tailed deer
silent as sentries among the trees.
 Dear grandparents, dear parents, dear
derelict feeling: whose beginning
 is written on the plaque outside
the visitor's center? Which futures
 still flicker like the embers
 constellating the end
of a half-extinguished cigarette?