from Artifacts of an Earlier Self

Reginald Gibbons

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From *Artifacts of an Earlier Self*

REGINALD GIBBONS

The Dream

At the edge of the thicket
you hesitate and I lead
the way in. After a long walk
we sit for a while on a log
and suck at the canteen,
watch a big rattler slide across the trail.

You smile at my fear, memory breathes
on the gray coals in you and they glow red.

Is this the way? I ask.
You nod and point deeper into the trees
along a sandy path you knew as a boy.
You appear as a boy,
a hot rain is falling, you chew pine resin,
your eyes grow darker, your muddy hopes
boil away in the summer sun.
You take a photograph from your pocket
and we enter it: now you are a baby
in your father's arms, you wait
to be put back down on the porch
of the new house, where behind the railing
other faces peek at the lens—
your cousins, soon to find
you their favorite, much-used toy.

The stifling light

of the sepia print is dripping
from the trees around us, seived through

pines, sinking into
the musky earth. It is time to go on.

Through thigh-stinging underbrush I
break the old trail open,

heading for the house and artesian well.
Beside a stump, your father appears, and he

argues with his father, it is 1910, he wants
a place of his own, and the old man,

who rode down from Arkansas to homestead
long before this time, cedes him

a section. They build the house,
your father picks you up,

an itinerant photographer produces this
memento... You pocket it again and point

a new direction, while around us
the gatekeepers lie, jewels

glittering along their serpentine spines,
black heads yawning
with a hiss, needles ready
in a bed of clean cotton: you are twelve still,

you stub a bare toe
hunting squirrels with a sling;

for a while you hold your eyes
on the trees, then in pain

you return to that place to see
nearly buried in the road's white dust

the thick dozing body whose fangs
you had taken for a thorn.

Your mother appears, she says you
are not to run, but to walk home.

They cut you with a razor, put
your foot in a bucket of kerosene,

a week passes, and then her young
half-Indian features fade

as, ever softer, she sings
you to sleep in a rocker...

The doves, their calls muffled
in the heat, pass out of our hearing now.

We come into the clearing, I step away
to let you be the first to see again
after fifty years the first place
you knew. Blackberry, high weeds

and a crab-apple tree rise
where the well might be.

Beyond that, in ragged scrub,
the ruin sags, two sharp-toothed window-frames

smashed at the chimney's ankles,
bubbly glass and brick, a heap of rubbish

surrounded by thick stands of stubby pines.
You stop and I stand beside you.

Now, as I begin to cry, you speak.