

BO BARTLETT

The Promised Land, 2015
oil on linen, 88 x 120 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

GARY HOUSTON

Natural Leader

Benny would never know by what magic or deliberations his college's admissions office bunched these incoming students, frosh like himself, in the same house with each other, these natural leaders of the future belonging to those exclusive "enrichment" groups mysteriously rescued from the classroom once a week over all his years between first grade and twelfth. But watching them often from across the street he did know he wasn't one of them and felt deep in his tender heart he never would be.

Many mornings he heard their feet stomp down the front porch steps of their house, six or seven of them shouting like movie Apaches as they broke into a run for the commons at Wingate. Out his dorm window Benny would see the one they called Bill in the lead, always with his head lowered. How could he possibly see what was in front of him? The head, already balding, was shaped like a bullet, but Benny kept imagining a beak that pierced the air to clear it for the flock behind him. It brought to Benny's mind how in distant ages motion had been represented in art, parallel lines that parted and whorled away when encountering some force. Out his window he could almost see those lines dispelled by a misplaced beak. A spearhead!

In his first week at the college Benny heard there was some kind of impromptu gathering of freshmen on Crenshaw Street near the stadium. A kid with a guitar and a JFK hair comb introduced himself to all as Mel Carney from Munster and immediately took to performing "the latest," Mel said, of his own folk songs. Between renditions he approached what had become an audience to explain how a song had popped into his head or how that summer's Newport Folk Festival changed his life.

Benny soon grew annoyed by a guy several feet away in the act of dazzling a coed. "Over the summer," he said, "I read Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*. Did you ever read it?" The girl said no. "But," said the guy, "I am also interested in world affairs and so many other things I could just bust." The girl giggled. Then at breakneck speed Bill, for it was he, skimmed from one topic to another—Barry Goldwater, the Common Market, Martin Luther King, Dag Hammarskjöld, El Greco, Giacometti, Ferlinghetti . . . It was a smooth voice with just a little catch in the throat now and then. The girl was entranced.

Benny wondered why he eavesdropped so freely, but

everyone except the talkers were doing it. At some moment after Mel stopped playing, a pervasion of belief had begun easing into the assembled minds that the stars of this afternoon were setting the course and tone for the four years they would spend here, a sense of destiny. For ever since the assassination almost a year ago, their mourning took the form of an earnest study of the president’s precocity when he was their age and an inchoate belief that a new Camelot would spring from them.

If Benny felt this destiny too, he still was in sympathy with Mordred. He had never really escaped the talkers, the “enriched” kids. They were still in his life. How he hated them all over again with their “well-spoken” self-assurance. Especially this Bill. He took a mental snapshot of the pair—Bill talking, the girl smiling, listening. In his four years to come, Benny sometimes would look for her but could not find her. She was pretty.

Bill was unavoidable. Their freshman year Bill was asked to read, for “its particular excellence,” his essay on *Walden* to the combined classes of a required course with a long reading list. He rested his arms on a podium set on a proscenium stage in a building long past its day and delivered his words with spellbinding, audacious ease and several effective dramatic phrasings. “A Frank Sinatra of the spoken word,” a wowed faculty member later put it. Bill slipped only once, and it was so like Benny to notice it. At the word *transcendentalism*, Bill couldn’t get past the second syllable and had to push on. But the audience was held.

“So what is Henry David Thoreau’s legacy to us today?” Bill asked in conclusion. “Can it not be greater, even far greater, than its significance in his own day? Our lives are immeasurably more complex, busy, aggravated, congested. And they are riddled by two great demons of our contemporary society, fear and greed, which fuel what is known as the Rat Race and our murderous need to overtake one another. Although Thoreau might not have envisioned our horrors, he knew their cure and wrote about it in his timeless book. It is the quiet, reflective, intimate acquaintance we each need to find inside.” He pointed to his heart and repeated in a whisper, “Inside.” He paused, beaming at his audience like an all-understanding prophet, then said, “Peace be with you.” Next he made a short, humble bow, capped with a “Thank you.” Bill in his first year was making

his mark, perhaps only Benny objecting (to himself) that here at this benign church-related college anyone could make an early mark.

In following months Bill and his breakfast sidekicks joined the fraternity reputed for its natural leaders and the next year moved into their dorm. Benny had been courted by only one fraternity, the one comprised of bespectacled “lizards,” a jocks’ derogation. Painfully he grasped why he would fit right in and for that very reason turned them down, sealing his college days, forfeiting the lifelong advantages he would otherwise have had, to be a goddamned independent.

One afternoon as he walked from Plato to calculus he heard his name shouted.

“Benny, wait up!”

It was Bill, who had been at a trot and now was striding purposefully up to him.

“My name is Bill Waterman,” he said smiling. He offered his hand, and though mystified, Benny shook it. “I just wanted to know if you’ll support me for SGA president. I’ll be running for it next year.”

“I’m a little puzzled, Bill. Have we met?”

“No, but I’ve seen you around.”

And I’ve seen you, Benny thought.

“Why now? You said next year so why not wait for next year?”

Bill smiled again. “I don’t like to wait.”

Weasel, Benny thought. “What would you want me to do? I’m not political.”

“Talk it up. I hear you know cool people. I hear you’re one yourself.” His grin became almost intimate. “Not my kind of people, no offense, but they, you, the intellectual types, add up. I was actually amazed to find out how much.” Add up? Had he taken a survey? “Look,” Bill continued, “I’m just wondering if you could put in a good word here and there. Would it kill you?”

“So you want me to campaign for you next fall?”

“Before the fall. Now, maybe. Or, okay, over the summer. Maybe write letters from home. Where are you from, anyway?”

“Shaker Heights, but I’m a lousy cheerleader, Bill.”

“I’ve heard you talk in class, Benny. You have a way with words. You know you do.”

Benny searched his memory for a class they both took.

“Come on, Ben,” said Bill with a rush of warmth, a brotherly hand on Benny’s shoulder.

“I can try.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

Bill saw a troop of his frat brothers and ran off, shouting over his shoulder, “Thanks!”

The next fall, standing where they stood before on the quad, he asked how Bill’s plans were coming.

“What plans?”

“You’re running for SGA president.”

“Oh, that,” said Bill. “Naw, it’s a dumb position. You know why the SGA exists? Because the student court is part of it. You know why the student court exists? To rubber-stamp your expulsion if you get caught with a girl in your room.”

“But Bill, I wrote letters.”

“Terrif of you, Benny, but like I said, I changed my mind. I’ll owe you a pitcher.”

In the spring of his junior year Benny became infatuated with Lisette Favier, direct from Paris and a student-teacher in the French department. Benny couldn’t think who she resembled until he saw the tormented Joanna Pettet in the film *The Group*. Lisette, hardly so tragic, was honey blonde, sensuous, willowy. She wore pale lipstick and nearly always a bone-white trench coat. Her eyes, brown and wide apart, had the striking effect of eroticizing seriousness. Lisette without makeup might have been revealed as plain as any girl, and in the part of her hair Benny could see the murk of another color. But Benny liked her illusions. He liked the very idea of them.

He often saw her in a coffee house operating just barely off campus grounds. From a dark varnished booth he would see her always before she saw him. When she did she would act as though there was no place to sit except across from him, order coffee, place her feet on his bench one ankle over the other, her shins unshaven, her heels below the strap insolently exhibiting the curvature of white callous. She would remove a pack of Gitanes from her bag, light one, appraise the room and then him, tapping lengths of ash into the black plastic ashtray.

“You look tired, Benny. Getting enough sleep?”

“I think so. Do I look tired?”

“You look like you sleep in your clothes. Look at you. You have dirt under your nails, your pants are baggy, your

shirt hasn’t been ironed in I would guess weeks, and you need a shave even though you cannot grow a beard.”

She had only a trace of an accent.

“I can grow one. I just don’t care to grow one.”

“Look at me, I smoke like, what do you say, I smoke like a chimney. But I do not smell of cigarettes because I wash my clothes. You don’t. And you smell of those.” She pointed to his pack of filtered Marlboros. “And you don’t even smoke them very much. You smell of those and I think you need to bathe.”

“Don’t the French say Americans are hung up on hygiene?”

“Oh, we think you are obsessed with deodorants, but soap? We are for it!” She blew on her coffee. “The French have other reasons to be anti-American, so-called. Have you read the Servan-Schreiber book?”

“I’ve read about it.”

“Oh, you’ve read *about* it. Shame on you. Read it. You’ll see what we think you do to our economy. And we hear you say de Gaulle is senile as well. Well, did you ever consider that many French do too?”

“Your point?”

“My point is that it is for us to say, not you.” She took a thoughtful drag, fluffed her hair, then she took a thoughtful sip. “And if there is any truth at all to your view of French hygiene, alright, then it is saying quite a lot if one of us says you need to bathe.”

He laughed, then she smiled.

“I like you, you know. You are very smart. You know Sartre even if you don’t read him in French. But you are smart. Did you know your mind is a magnet? For some women? Yes it is.” The toe of her shoe gave his rib a little kick. “It is.”

One weekend four of them, Bill, Benny, Lisette, and Max Millman, were brought together as the Ghanaian delegates to a mock UN General Assembly hosted by St. Olaf College in Northfield. Proceeding north by northwest, Bill and Benny took turns driving Bill’s Mercedes, Max being from New York and having no license. It was a long trip in a car with an air conditioner that did not work. At one point as he drove, Benny looked in the rearview and saw Bill sleeping with his head on Lisette’s lap as she looked placidly out the window. Max, amazed, later whispered, “Did you see her dress? It was *soaked*.”

They registered in the gym where the event was to occur. Many other “countries” from other campuses had checked in and were already preparing their roles. Not meaning to look for counterparts, Benny saw a Bill from Japan centering himself in a huddle like a star quarterback. There was a Max listening with a look of exasperation to his own East German quarterback. Benny revolved his head and came stock still to a kid with glasses, a high forehead, small eyes, weak jaw, messy hair, and baggy pants. The kid was also looking at Benny. Hi, Benny, thought Benny. Hi yourself, Benny thought back. The kid was from Turkey.

Lisette stood beside him.
“You are one of a kind,” he said.
She smiled as if she knew what had brought that on.
“Except where I am from. You should know, Benny, that there are many, many Lisettes there.”

They were put in the same dorm, Lisette with her own room on the second floor, the men sharing one on the third. They had a couple of hours to do whatever they had to do before returning to the gym, so Bill called a meeting in the guys’ room. He wanted to reinforce the point that Ghana was neutral in the Cold War. They threw questions at each other. “What about Vietnam?” “We express hope for a peaceful settlement.” “What about Israel?” “We are in favor of peace, but the less we say the better. It’s not our problem anyway.” “Do we question the West’s right to lecture Africans?” “Only implicitly.” Max supplemented: “And cleverly.” The four laughed.

“And we won’t let anyone from Albania twist our arm, right?”

“Right,” they said.
Stacked on the table marked Ghana, they found a dozen resolutions requiring their study in the next half hour. Bill was distributing them when a shadow crossed the table.

“Hello,” the man said, “my name is Nahid Masri. I head the Egyptian delegation.”

“Oh yes?” Bill said.
“Oh yes,” said Nahid. “You’re Ghana, right?” Bill nodded. Nahid then handed out four pages. “This is a new resolution. It is from us. Egypt’s. I don’t know if you are aware of it. I don’t think you are. It is a resolution calling for Israel to withdraw from all the land it took in the Six-Day War.”

“We understand,” said Bill. “But I’m telling you now we are neutral on that.”

“You are the leader here?” Nahid narrowed his eyes and leaned over the table.

“I am,” said Bill.
“May I ask your name?”
“Bill Waterman.”

“Let me ask you, Bill, are you aware that six brother African countries, three of them bordering Ghana, are going to vote in support of our resolution? Are you aware of that?”

Everything about Nahid was imposing and simply larger—his face and its features, his head, his hands, his shoulders, his height. He might also have been ten years older than the typical undergraduate.

Bill shifted his weight and said, “We just got here.”
“Bill, this is already a pan-African movement. In the next hour the whole continent except South Africa will be backing Egypt on this. Do you want to be like South Africa?”

Bill tried to find words but said nothing.
Benny spoke. “But like Bill says, we are neutral.”
“Let us step out of character for a second—what’s your name?”

“Ben.”
“Ben, let’s step out of character. Now, I am Jewish. You might think I’m something else, you might think I’m other things, and I am. I have a little Arab, a little Negro—distantly—a little Spanish. My father was a Palestinian. Before I went to Michigan State I studied at the University of Algiers. I speak Spanish, French, Arabic, and as you can see English. On the other hand my mother is a Sephardic Jew and so am I. But my job today, here, is to represent Egypt. Just as your job is not to represent the good old USA, it’s to represent a small country in Africa none of you, let me guess, ever visited in your lives.” He spotted Lisette at that moment. “Well, something tells me you might have, yes?” Lisette only smiled. Coyly. Nahid continued. “But you still have to do your level best, right? That is, to represent Ghana. Don’t you?”

“We have,” Bill protested. “We have studied Ghana—”
“Maybe not really, *Bill*,” Nahid retorted sharply. “Maybe you need to read less *Time* and *Newsweek* and more of the foreign press. Less *New York Times* and more *Le Monde*. Do you even read *Foreign Affairs*? No? I didn’t think so.” He leaned further into Bill and stared with such intensity Bill stepped back and Benny had to wonder if this Nahid was about to knock Bill to the floor.

“We’ll think about it,” said Bill.
“I am sure you will,” said Nahid, patting Bill’s arm.
After Nahid left, Bill stood torpid in the same spot for minutes.

“Bill?” said Benny.
“I need a drink of water,” Bill said. “Benny? Take over?”
He was off before Benny could say yes.
“Bill shouldn’t have let him talk to him like that,” said Lisette. “He let himself be buffaloed.”

Max laughed. “Buffaloed? Where did you pick that up?”
“Don’t laugh,” she said, “I don’t like it when people laugh at me.” She paused. “Buffaloed. I think it was that Western movie, *Shane*. Yes, that was it.”

When Bill returned he announced they would vote supporting the Egyptian resolution.
“Are you sure?” Benny asked.
Bill wheeled upon him. “What do you mean, am I sure? Of course I’m sure. I asked around.”

When the vote was taken they shouted in one voice aye to the resolution that Israel return to Egypt all territory taken in the war. At the end of the voting theirs was the only sub-Saharan delegation to so vote. Egypt itself abstained! Nahid Masri should have given his speech about honestly reflecting the country you represent to all the African delegations. But what struck Benny most was that Bill plainly hadn’t “asked around.”

When it was all over and participants helped clear the gym they saw Nahid again. “Well, we tried!” he shouted, cackling, “At least you guys came through!” He was at the table marked Albania.

“Piece of shit conned us,” Bill said. After steaming in silence he added: “Why did we get such a rinky-dink country to begin with?”

In the dorm lobby Lisette, Benny, and Max waited for Bill and the Mercedes.
“He’s such a phony,” Max whispered.
“Who?” Benny asked.
“You know.”

Ignoring Max, Lisette turned to Benny. “You might have been better.”
“I don’t know that I’m much of a leader.”
She raised her eyebrows. “Oh, I see you now. You like to be led.”

Before summer Benny found himself killing the pitcher

Bill promised long ago. It was an odd setting for hearing Bill or anyone list career plans. T&J’s was a smelly, chintzy, ultimately depressing place owned and operated by a man named Tim and another named Joe, frequented by students like Bill and Benny as well as farmers and truckers, foundry and factory workers from Kentucky, Tennessee, and towns north of the Ohio River. It was the county’s only watering hole, at its start conceived for white collar clientele, but soon Tim and Joe installed a jukebox to placate the real patrons who drank at the bar. Presently Merle Haggard sang “To Each His Own” on it.

Bill refreshed their steins.
“My idea is first to spend two years at a place like Columbia for a master’s in philosophy concentrating on law and politics—you know, philosophy of law, philosophy of government—then law school, I’m thinking Harvard. Then I’ll apply to Fletcher, then go for a job in State.”

“State?”
“The State Department. Or maybe, maybe the UN—the real one.” He laughed, so then Benny laughed. “Or, you know, maybe DuPont.”

“But you’re talking about years—years and years. And a ton of money.”

“I don’t worry about the money, my folks are well-off.” Benny of course knew that. Bill scratched at his upper lip where a moustache was arriving. “I do worry about the years.”

“Then why do it?”
“It’s what I want to put myself through before I plunge into the real world.” He explained how each step required another to be taken first. He said it all so automatically he gave the impression he had drilled the vision into himself.

Bill ordered another pitcher. They drank in pensive silence. Benny gazed through the fog of cigarette smoke, through the sad raucous din from the bar of alcoholic coughs, splutters, and belches. Now and then a tumbler shattered on the floor or a thick thumb arced in contempt over a shoulder at soft-faced serious students seated at tables or corner booths.

After graduation Benny figured it was high time to go abroad. He was not happy to hit his parents for travel money, nor they so soon after college to give it. He insisted it was only a loan, they insisted it was a gift gladly rendered, he insisted he’d repay it. The trip would give him two weeks

in Paris, a stop in West Berlin, thence . . . Vienna? Prague? First he would stay two days in New York with cousin Stan and his wife on Staten Island. They were old enough to be his uncle and aunt and remote in other ways. Every now and then Stan would give Benny a look that inquired, “Now who are you again?”

One day was carefully set aside to see Lisette. She had not returned to the college for Benny’s last year and had secured a translating job at the UN (the real one). Days before his flight out of Cleveland Hopkins, she sent her east side address. “Call first, Benny,” she wrote. “And push the button at the street door when you arrive. I’ll be down to get you. As ever, Lisette.” There was a P.S.: “I cannot wait to see you again.”

Despite the heat, Benny wore brown corduroys under a pale raincoat with two metal rings at the chest of no utility he could determine. It was a heavenly wait, as waits go, on the sidewalk. He gazed at the avenue traffic and applied words to it like *muscular* and *romantic*. He thought of Gene Kelly and drizzly fog and he lighted a Player’s. A soft breeze teased his sprayed hair and the next moment undid it. Two hands, cool and soothing, were suddenly upon his eyes accompanied by a childlike giggle. He turned and there she stood, beaming as she allowed a kiss to land at the corner of her mouth. She wore dungarees, a white shirt too big for her, and sneakers, her hair damp and smelling of shampoo and no perceivable makeup but a naked, burnished look that hinted new beginnings.

Her head beckoned. “Come up.” She led him by hand as they climbed to the second floor, Benny a step behind where he caught himself pondering whether many years later he would retain the image of her right buttock as it altered its round contour in the motion of climbing.

“You’ll like Paul,” she said. Paul?

In no time he was shaking hands with Paul, but who out of nowhere was Paul? The man he met looked forty. His hair was black, greasy, unkempt, his face pitted with memories of acne, his chin weak, his figure slight and short. Still there was a courtly air, an intimation of class. Paul spoke gently, affectionately.

“Lisette has talked about little else but Benny. She says you are going to Paris? And then Berlin? Yes? And then Czechoslovakia? That is wonderful, Benny. There is a line in *Citizen Kane* this reminds me of, what is it? It’s

something like, ‘I wish I was a boy your age going on a trip like that for the first time!’ You will love it. Do you know where you’ll be staying in Paris?”

“No.”

“Not to worry. I know a perfect little place for you near the Champs. I’ll write it down.” The apartment was a loft, bare floored and roomy. Paul walked several yards away to a counter that partitioned a kitchen. Under a stack of magazines he found paper.

Lisette touched Benny’s arm. “Paul has been all over Europe.”

“I gathered.”

“He’s a well-known journalist.”

“What is his last name?”

“Henreid.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“Is he American? I can’t tell.”

She sought his eyes. “You are funny, Benny. But how are you? Do you feel alright?”

Benny put on a smile. “I’m fine. Why?” Paul came back with the address. Benny pretended to read it.

“So pleased to meet you, Benny. Please do sit down. We were just having a little coffee, bread, butter, marmalade. Join us?”

“Just coffee, thanks.”

Beyond the grimy front windows came the blaring of car horns on the street below where he projected envy upon the person he had been but ten minutes before, down there waiting for her under shelter of expectant illusion. Then it turned to pity, for where would that poor bastard be ten minutes later? He heard the chatter of Lisette and Paul who had left him in this vacuous space to assemble their Continental breakfast. They spoke in an easy lived-in French and soon Benny was guessing how many other languages Paul spoke fluently. He is *one of those*, he thought, as if it had always been his rotten ego-crushing luck to encounter *one of those*. He flashed upon Nahid Masri and broke into a rare rash of affinity for good old Max Millman and even Bill Waterman. They too spoke only English.

“Benny?” Lisette called. “Black or white?” He had forgotten she always said “white” instead of “with cream.”

“Black,” he said.

When they returned with a tray he decided to give ten

more of his minutes before leaving. But still he watched and knew he would remember them buttering their hunks of crusty bread, spooning their orange marmalade. It was always a bitter, acquired taste for him, orange marmalade, but not for the cultured people an ocean away.

At the door he could no longer look at Lisette and gave the full of his attention to Paul, whom he pretended it had been his unbelievably great fortune to meet, and thus it was Paul who spoke the last words he would take from the encounter: “Do look up that charming little hotel.”

He once told her she was wrong to think he was any kind of expert on M. Sartre. But he went on to say he took to the existentialist discussion of “bad faith” (*mauvaise foi*), the tendency to deny oneself the freedom to make a choice by dishonestly denying that one possesses the ability to make it. Most of his time on the Pan Am to Paris passed with this swirling in his head, though he could not yet relate it to the scene in New York. He finished his drink and concluded it wasn’t her bad faith he should worry about but his. *Peut-être*. Two passengers to his left were startled by his snort of laughter. He found Paul’s piece of paper in his jacket pocket. “Hotel Victor Hugo, 19 Rue Copernic,” it said. Paul had drawn a little map with a curvy street and an X. How thoughtful. He laughed again, realizing he would land in Europe bristling with anti-Europeanism.

Benny had always known he couldn’t afford graduate school, nor could his parents, and this hardly bothered him because though he majored in English he never knew what he would ever do with it. It was always a little joke to him. “Oh, you majored in English! How unusual! Please oh please say something to me in English!” He moved to Columbus—near enough his folks, he hoped, to assuage bruised feelings—and kerplunk decided he was a freelance writer.

He saw little of his roommates, two Ohio State graduate students who had only two things in common with him, dread of the draft and being sent to Vietnam. Left to hours alone, he called himself a professional writer and worked daily at his Royal portable on a self-imposed schedule he considered professional. At first there were book reviews for a Columbus paper, being its go-to man on books covering rock music, the “counterculture,” the “generation gap,” the “hippies,” “Negroes” (a holdover in the paper’s stylebook), and soon Vietnam and the antiwar movement. Then he did

reviews for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, whose sweet books editor let him enlarge his scope to “think pieces” before she grabbed a job in New York and was replaced by a crusty man of the old school who’d have none of it.

But then he’d struck up a friendly phone relationship with someone his age named Dan Fellows who worked both the news and features desks and suggested Benny offer himself as a stringer if he agreed to pay his own travel costs. The paper took him on.

Several pieces that pleased his editor got him sent to Detroit to cover a strike at Chrysler’s Hamtramck assembly plant. The editor said the plant’s labor was largely black, as was the strike organization DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement). The paper wanted quotes from strikers, UAW officials, and any Chrysler-Plymouth executives who would talk. Benny figured he could get to strikers at the picket line but he could not divine a way to the others.

The American auto industry was still booming—an article in *BusinessWeek* said so. Was that how his piece should begin? The editor once chewed him out for “writing a piece in advance,” and he was determined never to do it again. He took good quotes, some fiery, some evasive, on the DRUM side. He used his hotel room phone the following day to see if he could get someone from Chrysler or the auto industry or the City of Detroit to talk to him.

“I’ll switch you to Mr. Waterman,” said the Chrysler receptionist. He wondered: Bill’s dad had been an auto executive. Bill always talked about lunching with him at the Detroit Boat Club. So was this Bill’s dad? Was it Bill himself? With a click Mr. Waterman came on.

“Benny, are you packed? I’ve got the car running downstairs. We’ll drive to St. Olaf, find that motherfucker Nahid and kick him in the nuts, whaddaya say?”

Benny’s laugh was partly in disbelief.

“I’ll hold him from behind and you do the kicking, Bill.”

They agreed to meet at the London Chop House, a darkened walk-down described in a Joyce Carol Oates novel he’d read. As he sipped coffee he looked over the walls of framed celebrity photographs wondering why a Motown restaurant with no stake in show business, not counting the music called Motown, would pretend it was Sardi’s. He’d called the *Detroit News* theater critic to ask if any Detroit shows were worth seeing. The man had somehow won a Pulitzer working out of a town that

offered virtually nothing on his beat. “It’s a wasteland,” he chortled. “Really, nothing’s going on here unless you care to see a college production of—are you ready for this?—the entire *Oresteia*.”

“Hey! Benny! Long time!” Bill’s shout tumbling down the steps took his mind back to the morning scenes of Spearhead and his flock. They shook hands and an impulse to hug borne more of generational fashion than amity progressed only to the point of hands grasping upper arms. “You look great, old buddy old pal,” Bill said. Bill himself had grown fat, ruddy, and bald but also richer than ever by the cut of his pinstripe suit. Benny knew he would let him take the check.

They both ordered Dewar’s and water, no ice, and food. A half hour into the lunch Bill was covering his Chicago life and times.

“Oh sure, I went through the freak stage. I went through the straight radical stage, too. I dropped acid, I got stoned every night, I was in Grant Park, I knew Jerry and Abbie, I got teargassed—”

Benny interrupted. “Big deal, Bill. Even Hubert Humphrey got teargassed.”

Bill barked a laugh. “True! I think he sweated off his hair dye that night.” He stopped and took a moment as if something in Benny’s tone did not jibe with the old days. “And they ran a picture of me in the *Sun-Times* sitting akimbo on the ground with other freaks at Daley Plaza near the Picasso. I had a beard then, and my hair, such as it was—ha!—came down to my shoulders. We held each other’s hands chanting Ginsberg’s om. But I was in the center, which is something I really liked, I don’t mind telling you. I mean, I was leading it, I was in the middle of something. And I look back and I love, love that whole time because, well, I don’t actually know. But that picture said it all.”

At that moment the waiter set a tray holding two prime rib plates on a folding stand.

Bill started with his tossed salad.

“Any good?” Benny asked.

“Not especially,” said Bill, his mouth full. “I just like to get it out of the way.”

Minutes passed as they cut into the beef, which was too good to be interrupted by talk. But finally:

“So what happened?” Benny asked.

“What happened?”

“Why didn’t you stay in Chicago?”

“Well, I could say that those times, fun as they were, were no more than that. Drugging, drinking, protesting, fucking. Fun. Chicago was fun—badass town, but fun. Now I could say the time had come to put aside fun things. I could say Dad wanted me to take a job back here in Detroit. Those things were true, after all. By the way, I’m way above that job now, way above. But something else brought me back here. Do you remember Max?”

“Max Millman from school?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

“He was living in Chicago. I ran into him in a bar on the North Side. We chewed the fat for awhile, but all along I noticed he was giving me this weird look, but—you know me—it might have been only because I was doing most of the talking, you know, about myself, so I asked him, What are you into now? He said, real sarcastically, which surprised me, “*Into?*” Then he said, “Cancer.”

Benny put down his fork. “Cancer??”

“Oh, he didn’t mean it, he wasn’t an oncologist and he definitely didn’t have cancer. He just picked the most provocative thing he could say because he wanted to knock me off balance.”

“But why?”

“You won’t believe this. To deflate me for using the word *into*.”

“Wait a second. *Into?* Why did he have problem with *into?*”

“That’s what I wanted to know. So he told me. He hated the fact that it had become *a way of speaking*, a part of the youth culture patois, something like that. He said people who said *into* that way did it just so they’d be accepted by one another. He called them pretentious. We were pretending to be people we weren’t, pretending we dug ourselves, dug each other, because we dressed and spoke a certain way, dropped pills and tripped. And tried to out-hip each other. Then he really unloaded. He called *me* pretentious and then he said, ‘On the other hand, Bill, you always were pretentious.’ So I said, ‘Fuck you, Max,’ got up and left him there.”

“I think at school we took his nebbishness for some exotic strain of cool, like Maynard G. Krebs.” Bill didn’t laugh. “I wouldn’t have seen that coming from Max.”

“Me neither. But he’s on my shit list now and I say fuck him.”

Benny decided against saying he was still in touch with Max.

“And all this over a preposition. Of all the words to be bugged by . . .”

“Well, call it a trigger. Anyway, it got me thinking. Had I, on some level, you know?—not *his* level but *my* level—truly been bullshitting myself? And I realized, *with tremendous reluctance*, mind you, that—another Scotch?”

“Yeah.”

Bill signaled the waiter. “Another round, please. So it took some soul-searching, about a year’s worth if you want to know, but I moved back here and took the job.”

They ate quietly for a minute. The steak, they again agreed, was perfect. The waiter set down the new drinks and Bill brought his glass to his mouth.

Benny asked: “So what are you into now?”

Bill smothered a spit take and wagged his finger at Benny. He set his glass down, wiped his mouth and his face grew taut.

“Listen, I put the counterculture behind me and what I learned since those days is something simple and it’s this. Benny, let me tell you. I used to think J. Paul Getty was the richest man in America. Let me tell you, Benny, if you know somebody’s, anybody’s, name, then believe me he’s not *close* to being one of the people who run the show. There are people in this world, in corporations, in banking and government, with so much power, so much wealth, Benny, they have absolute anonymity and absolute control over our lives. I mean, my dad is a pauper next to these guys. They decide elections, trade deals, shit, they decide war and peace. Benny, it makes me feel like a fucking moron that I thought I was in an ‘antiwar movement.’ Are you kidding me? If the powers that be dictate war, old buddy old pal, it’s war. Trust me, these guys are beyond accountability and they are above the law. They can fly anywhere on the planet they want to, no customs check, no hassle, no passport, and they can do it at the drop of a hat. And—“

“And you want to be one of them.”

Bill squinted. For the second time that afternoon Benny felt himself being studied.

Finally Bill said, “Don’t you?”

On the street Benny waited until Bill could flag down

a cab. It was November and against the air, cold and windy, Bill teetered right and left and slapped at his arms.

“Christ, I should have brought a coat. At least you have yours.”

“It goes wherever I go until May comes along.”

“Yeah.”

Bill walked quickly away, looked around a corner, and came back. No sign of a cab. He shrugged, but then something crossed his mind.

“Hey, you didn’t ask me about the strike.”

Benny confessed he would have asked had he remembered to, which made Bill laugh.

“Okay, Bill, may I quote you?”

“Don’t be a jagoff. Of course you can.”

“Okay, will it end soon?”

“It’ll be over in a month.”

“Okay, good. How will it end?”

“Let’s just say it will end.”

Bill grinned enigmatically as if it would take a week to explain the dynamics of the process.

Benny saw a cab and pointed. Bill quickly turned, but the cab stopped to pick up a couple.

They looked around again, now suddenly and rather blatantly weary of standing before each other.

But then Bill perked up.

“Hey! I was going to tell you, you remember Lisette Favier at school? The assistant French instructor or whatever she was?”

Startled, Benny feigned the attempt to put a face to the name. “Uh, yeah.”

“Well, anyway. One night she came over, Lisette. We’re getting high, talking about people, I guess a little about you and Max, the mock UN thing. We’re sitting the length of the room from each other so stoned we don’t say anything for an hour or”—he laughed—“maybe it’s only five minutes. Then out of the blue she says, ‘You want to go to bed with me, right?’ And believe it or not, Benny, she has absolutely taken me by surprise. I don’t expect anything like that, I mean not so directly, not from her—she’s practically *faculty*. She says, ‘I have heard that you are always ready. Is that true?’” Bill roared. “Ready! She said ready! She said I had a reputation of being always ready!”

“Were you?”

“Of course I was ready!” They both laughed. “Oh

YEAH, was I ready!” Fighting off the chill and finding warmth in the memory, he jumped up and down, drawing attention, and shouted. “I was ready alright!”

And Benny too, resolved not to give himself away, laughed hard. He would appear privileged that Bill would entrust this confidence to him. He nearly asked how she was.

“Christ, it’s cold,” Bill said, slapping about him.

And it was over in a flash. A cab pulled up. They agreed to stay in touch. Bill climbed in and rolled down the window, his face florid as if the episode he’d just related grew funnier and funnier the more he thought about it, wheezing his laughter, enjoying having Benny in on it so they could laugh as conspirators might laugh. “And I’m STILL ready!” Bill cried out, climaxing this new brotherhood of risibility, Bill waving as an afterthought as the cab dashed away, bequeathing exhaust to the frigid air.

Benny had meant to ask what happened with the Fletcher School and those other plans. But Bill, he decided, had found a ladder more to his liking. And with a bit of exultancy, Benny relinquished all interest in Bill’s path to whatever form of greatness providence would bestow upon him.

Unless, that is, you can include developments decades later after he returned to his desk as chief foreign affairs correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun*. He was back from a conference in Geneva on the “nexus” of climate change and terrorism. In his e-mail he saw something from Max Millman. “You’ll love this, Benny. :>) Max.” It was a link to a *Lansing State Journal* piece headlined “Ex-Auto Exec Arrested.” Benny saw in the lead sentence the name William D. Waterman, that the story involved a minor, and read no further. “Thanks for sending, Max,” he replied. “Strangely enough I can’t work up the proper amount of schadenfreude. Ben.”

Max was a full art history professor in Ann Arbor. It was not a position, let alone field, Benny even recently would have predicted for Max, but Max, as Bill once discovered, wasn’t predictable. Bill had become a different kind of history as far as Max and Benny were concerned—bluntly speaking, an irrelevance—but in this brave new e-mail world neither man could refrain from swapping the occasional item about old acquaintances, to say nothing of the one reported in the *Lansing State Journal*.

Years passed. A few months before his fortieth class reunion, Benny’s home phone rang. “Hello, this is Bill Waterman.” “Why, Bill, what a—“ The robocall continued: “Like me, I know you are all eager to share old times as our big four-oh reunion draws nigh. I just want you to know I’ll be on hand to lead a physical workshop based on my years coaching professionals in business, politics, education, religion, the arts, and many other walks of life. You know, whatever our age we can always use a tune-up. I have been helping people for a long time improve their productivity by getting their brains to know what their bodies have been trying to tell them. Now don’t be alarmed. This is serious, but believe me it is also a lot of fun and I hope to show you just how much fun it can be at the reunion. Thanks for listening and peace be with you.”

He called Max.

“Yeah, I got it too,” Max said.

“Do you know where he is now?”

“I googled him. He’s in Pennsylvania, just outside Easton. You going?”

Benny said he couldn’t on account of work. It was an acceptable lie.

Max went. He called Benny the day after returning to Ann Arbor.

“You are sooo lucky you weren’t there.” Max took awhile describing beauties of yore now flabby beyond recognition.

“And Bill? His, what was it? His workshop?”

“We were in the new student union, about a hundred of us, drinking wine. And Bill—he lost weight and joined the shaved-head crowd—and Bill, he ding-dings his glass and invites everybody to follow him into the next room, which I can see from my table is a dance studio. Well, nobody really wants to, but about thirty people haul themselves out of their chairs and follow him in.”

“Including you?”

“Please. I liked my inertia, so I stayed at my table.”

The word *inertia* prompted an old question.

“Max, do you remember yelling at him for saying something like, ‘What are you into now?’”

“Huh?”

“Bill once said you had a falling-out over it.”

“Oh, my God!” Max laughed. “First of all, Benny, you have to be friends before you can fall out. Secondly—well, what was it? Oh yeah, well, he’d been talking ad nauseam

about how he was into the Yippies, into the Stones, into Norman O. Brown and Marcuse, into speed and astral projection, into some Indian guru, for the love of God. It wasn’t much different, really, from hearing Nixon say ‘Sock it to me.’ Come on, you know how plastic Bill was. Or is. So by the time he got around to asking what *I* was into, I just couldn’t stomach him anymore.”

“I know what you mean, Max.” Then came a fresher subject. “Any gossip about that episode? You know, Bill and the minor?”

“Nary a syllable.”

The next week Benny’s curiosity got the better of him. Someone had posted Bill’s workshop on YouTube. He hit Play. At the start there was a blank screen with only sounds of shuffling and murmurs, then a voice, Bill’s, asking everyone to remove shoes and socks. Then the picture came on. The focus took time to adjust, but Benny made out elderly people sitting on the floor or bending over the best they could to make themselves barefoot amid titters over one another’s infirmities. The view zoomed on Bill, and Benny could see that Max was right. It jarred to see the completely shaved head.

Close by was another barefoot man with gray thick hair and not a happy expression on his face. After Bill asked the man, “Mel, tell us what you do” and “Mel, what seems to be your problem?” it dawned on Benny that Mel was Mel Carney, the freshman folksinger.

“Well,” said Mel, “people keep telling me I am round-shouldered. And I have heard others say my head juts forward or they say I don’t stand up straight. I heard someone say—”

Bill, who already had begun moving his palms up and down Mel’s spine without touching it, said, “I’m listening, Mel. Go on.”

“I heard someone say the word *kyphotic*, but I don’t know if that’s true. Actually I don’t even know what it means, I guess.”

The audience tittered. But Bill, focused, softly said, “Uh-huh, kyphotic.” Both men were quiet for many moments as Bill continued his exploration. The watchers became respectfully patient. The room grew hushed.

“Alright, Mel,” Bill said at last, “now I’m just going to do some adjustments, here. I want your body to respond, but not your mind, do you understand? Don’t think, or rather,

just let your body do the thinking, if that makes sense, okay? Okay, Mel?” Mel said, uncertainly, “Okay.” Bill’s fingers began to fall lightly upon strategic places along Mel’s spinal column as he addressed the audience: “I am merely *inducing* something here, ladies and gentlemen, *inducing*. You see, Mel’s body is making the decisions.” As minutes passed Benny saw Mel’s body by steps and degrees straighten up, his shoulders and his head come into alignment with his upper back. And Mel looked taller and seemed to know it as the crowd gasped in what sounded like astonishment. Abruptly the video ended.

Months later Benny asked Max if there were any good scholarly articles on the depiction of motion in the history of art. “I myself am amazed there is so little,” Max e-mailed back, “but see the attached.” The article cited such artistic tactics as bodies in dynamic poses, Leonardo’s repositioned arms and legs and the “photographic blur,” but nothing about parallel lines in the air parting when an object pummeled through them. Perhaps, Benny thought, I dreamt them. But he read on. The article also talked about a sequence of discrete still images, like a man or a horse running, which if sped up would show the figure in motion. Well, this was well-known, but then Benny reflected that if you could reverse the process, go from the figure in motion back to the discrete images in which it is motionless, you might find one that fulfills the meaning or the promise of the figure. Somewhere in those flip cards that his memory could never quite eject might be a still picture, an instant, of eighteen-year-old Bill Waterman leading his buddies down the stairs or up the hill, and not the still picture Benny had nursed, derided, and resented, but the one Bill had at least once had of himself.

Gary Houston is managing editor of *Chicago Quarterly Review*, where three of his stories have been published. A former *Chicago Sun-Times* staffer, his freelance writings have appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Kinesis*, *Libido*, *Aware*, *New England Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Nit & Wit*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.