

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