BO BARTLETT

Allegiance, 2007
oil on linen, 66 x 48 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

REGINALD GIBBONS

Journey

My strong father and I will go hunting together. We will go in a truck, his pickup truck, and we will take guns, perhaps some large shotguns, perhaps big rifles. Let's take thirty-aught-sixes, he'll say. We will drive far out of the city, we will stop on a dirt road, with a meadow on our left; and a hundred yards across the meadow, the tree line of a deep-green, dark-gray forest.

I think some animals will be shot. Lions, perhaps. Or will be stalked, or will stalk us too at the tree line.

Carry your gun properly, my father says.

He is gathering his gear from behind the driver's seat. I am to gather my own in the same way. The autumn air is chilly, and we put on our favorite wool overshirts that are worn thin at the elbows. He locks the truck and checks both doors.

At the fence bordering the meadow he reaches through the barbed wire and lays his gun down carefully to the left on the ground, and then he holds the fence wires apart for me. He does this the proper way, stepping on the middle strand and pulling up the top one. I reach through and lay my gun down to the right, and I bend at the waist, keeping my back straight, and I step through and stand upright again. Then I hold the fence for him. The proper way. Then we pick up our rifles. We stand together, we load, we check our safeties. And then we start walking toward the tree line, to encounter what is waiting for us there.

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A male lion may have a mane, long like a woman's hair, that trembles and shakes when he roars, and the long blood-matted clumps of his mane are like snakes. The hair on a female lion's sleek head is short. It looks male, to me. But lions don't think this way.

I questioned a guide before my father and I began this journey; the guide said that there are no Medusas here, that Medusas live elsewhere and aren't even understood here. If a Medusa came here, the guide said, she would not even be much noticed as she walked through the market where the lively hawkers, wearing masks of gorgeous twigs, stand behind their mounds of pineapples and peppers, their buckets of flowers, their pyramids of tuber skulls, none of them dead yet.

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My father and I will go hunting together. My father leading, we will cross the meadow, not in a straight line but following a narrow game path and avoiding snakes. When we come near the deep-green, dark-gray forest, my father will stop and hold up his hand to signal me to stop also. The meadow and the forest are on one continent; the lions on another; the Medusas on a third; and this place is on all of them. Silently my father will study the tree line till he sees what makes sense to him, and then he will head for some particular point, and I will follow, not knowing what he knows.

The forest is much bigger than I can imagine; the dark smooth-trunked trees grow close together and there is no undergrowth. If we wanted, we could move freely through it in almost any direction, around the massive dark-gray trunks of the trees that stand fiercely upright and rise to great height and spread their leaves like frighteningly tall, deep-green fountains above us. When I look up I feel dizzy. Their lofty interwoven branches are thick with leaves, here and there a lighter green and even gold, but down on the forest floor the light is dim and gray, crepuscular, tenebrous, caliginous. Murky and somber. Threatening. Webbed with invisible shadows, with a fall of lightlessness, a steady darkening that never quite becomes completely dark.

The silent forest seems to be empty of living creatures. But my father knows better. Sometimes he leads and cautions me to stay close behind him and carry my gun properly; then, looking around, he will decide differently, and he will let me pass and he will follow, watching closely behind us while I lead us toward the point he has signaled as our destination of the moment.

Almost I expect a lion to leap into the path before us, almost I hope everything ominous will turn out to be harmless, even amusing. But instead, while I am leading, it is a tall striding warrior with a close-shaven female lion head who appears, crossing our path suddenly from nowhere, looking straight at us. My heart beats fast and hard. To me it's clear that he is looking only at my father and is thinking about killing him. But the warrior decides he doesn't care to do it, and after this brief hesitation in his stride he steps into the trees on the other side of the path, and in that instant he disappears completely. I stop and turn around. My father is still cautiously looking back over his shoulder as he comes after me. He saw nothing.

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My father is leading again. We are moving toward a place that has more light, and as we get nearer I see that it is a small clearing, although completely in the shadow of the tall trees. In a circle around the edge of the clearing, and facing the center of the clearing, stand many short terracotta statues of women. They are sculpted with mouths open, singing or crying, with closed eyes, and wearing skirts of thin long snakes hanging head downward. Their breasts, which the sculptor touched and molded with his hands, are bare. There are a certain number of the statues, and on each one a certain number of snakes.

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I am afraid that if I had to fire my rifle in order to save my father from some attacking beast, I would fail, he would be knocked down and torn, bleeding and dying, in front of me and I would be able to do nothing.

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My father touches my shoulder to stop me from moving into the circle of female statues. He says nothing. He hands me his thirty-aught-six and moves to the center of the circle. He opens his pants and takes his you-know in his hand and he ejaculates onto the ground.

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I was embarrassed to see his you-know and to see him do this with it. I no longer wanted to be hunting with him.

My father zipped up and took his gun from me and also took mine. You take a piss there, outside the circle, he said.

I don't have to go, I said.

That doesn't matter, it's something you have to do. Even a little, he said.

I have always done either as he told me, or, once in a while, in opposition to what he told me, which is the same thing. I could feel that I had a few drops in me. I unzipped. I did it.

My father had come near and knelt down with a rifle in each hand and he watched my you-know as I held it, as the few drops came out and fell to the ground. I did not look at him.

I never wanted to go hunting. I don't like the feeling I have after I have shot some creature, after the exciting moment of following it in the rifle sights and so carefully beginning to move the trigger with my trigger finger and at such a distance, so remote from the unsuspecting beast, suddenly ending its business, whatever it was doing. Ending it. Stunning it and knocking it into a frenzy of bewildered flopping agonies and last thoughts, crazed disbelief and icy alarm as the life goes out of it. It stops moving and is not what it was. I don't like that.

I zipped up. As casually as if nothing had happened, my father began walking ahead of me back in the direction from which we had come. I hung back, watching him go. After a few minutes he raised his gun to his shoulder quickly and fired twice, straight up the path, and then fired a third time. The shots were so loud. He ran ahead and I followed him. I was excited again and a little afraid. His prey was lying on the path, killed where it had planned to attack us, its long legs still, its dead eyes open. The bare head.

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With his knife my father cut off the head and the legs, and another part. He dragged what was left of the body off the path and abandoned it. He unfolded a blue tarpaulin from somewhere, and in it he wrapped the legs and head. He asked me to carry his thirty-aught-six and he slung this blue burden over his shoulder. I would not have been strong enough to carry it.

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I was worried that we might again be attacked on the path. But this did not happen. My father went somewhere. I did not learn where. I did not even see him go. He was gone. I was inside the forest, where there is no vegetation except the smooth-trunked trees.

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I have never found the circle of statues again. I am not sure now that I really saw them. I think I have lost my rifle.

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I don't know why, but it's better to walk by stepping on the roots of the trees instead of on the ground. Immense roots that protrude from the damp black earth, so it's not difficult to stay on them and not touch the ground.

There might be a cottage somewhere.

There is a footbridge over a stream. It's made of wood. I have crossed over this bridge countless times. Beyond the edge of the forest—which I cannot find, which I have not been able to reach again, nor open sunlight, nor anything familiar of the world I knew and that knew me: our city, the market, the television, our house, my father and my mother and my sisters . . . Beyond the edge of the forest somewhere is that dirt road with my father's truck parked on it, just beyond that barbed wire fence. I know the proper way to go through a barbed wire fence.

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I saw a woman. I felt something. I looked around and saw her half-hidden by a tree trunk, watching me. I was shaking. I looked around me and then back at her. She was still watching me, not moving. Wearing a dress. Was it green? She had short hair. I ran as fast as I could to get away.

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I imagine him sitting in his truck. He has his rifle. Perhaps he is smoking a cigarette. Waiting for me. In the back of the truck is the blue tarpaulin, and what is inside it.

He is not impatient. He will wait. I can't outwait him. But I think that now, from that dirt road, the forest cannot even be seen.

Oh Father, couldn't you have helped me? Why, when you were with other men, and I was with you, did you joke to them that you could cut me up into pieces? Oh Father, why, after you welcomed me into this world and carried me in your arms and made me laugh, did you go into the truck, did you go on the long road, did you go among the things only you know?

Reginald Gibbons is the author of a novel, *Sweetbitter*, and a book of very short fiction forthcoming in 2017. His tenth book of poems, *Last Lake*, will be published in October. He has also translated Sophocles, Euripides, and modern Spanish and Mexican poets. He teaches writing and literature at Northwestern University.