

WAYNE THIEBAUD

Reservoir and Orchard, 2001
mixed media, 40 x 40 in.



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JERRY MARTIEN

Living Like Okies

its lines as smooth as the wave he combed in his hair. He was out of Shafter up near Bakersfield, two or three years older than me, done with high school. He followed the crops from Tule Lake to Yuma.

Between harvests, fall of 1955, he was working nights at the Signal station in Perris, the little Southern California farm town we were both stuck in. Evenings we'd sit around the electric heater and talk about cars and girls and a hundred things we thought possible. Every once in a while somebody would come in and buy a dollar's worth of gas.

Seventeen cents a gallon. A dollar would take you into next week.

Jo Ann Davis was the youngest and smartest of three wild sisters who lived with their mother in an old Union Pacific boxcar made into a house. It had a room added on the front, steps added on to that.

We were sitting on the steps. A couple of the neighbor's chickens scratched in the yard. It was the summer before high school.

What I can't understand, she said, is why people call me an Okie.

She'd never been to Oklahoma.

Eighth grade. Arkie was put behind his cousin, Okie, in a seat in the middle row. He was way behind in other ways, always asking his cousin for answers. You could tell Okie was embarrassed.

Okie's real name was Arnold. His cousin Vernon was smaller, with a deeper twang to his speech. Arn and Vern. Okie and Arkie. When they had to talk in the classroom, the Mexican kids about fell out of their desks laughing. Why don't you make *them* talk English?

Nobody had called Arnie an Okie till his cousin from Arkansas arrived. After eighth grade Vernon disappeared, maybe went back to Arkansas. Arnold got to be a lot bigger and tougher.

Nobody called him Okie.

* * *

They plowed the deep-rooted perennial grasses, planted wheat and corn and cotton, and when the next cycle

One winter morning I was splitting kindling beside the wood stove. My little rental was in a damp gully of coastal redwood and alder at the edge of town, impossible to keep warm. My friend Wyn had come over for coffee. He said, I thought only Okies split wood in the house.

Later, when I told him I'd used the line in a poem, he said, I hope you didn't mention my name.

Wyn was from Georgia. He was sensitive to California's prejudices. When I wanted to give him a hard time I'd call him a Cracker.

But his remark took me back to a time and place I'd gone to some trouble to get away from. My mother had been the last person to compare me to an Okie, half a century ago. I'd told her I thought it was a compliment.

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Sam Slade drove a metallic blue '39 Mercury coupe,