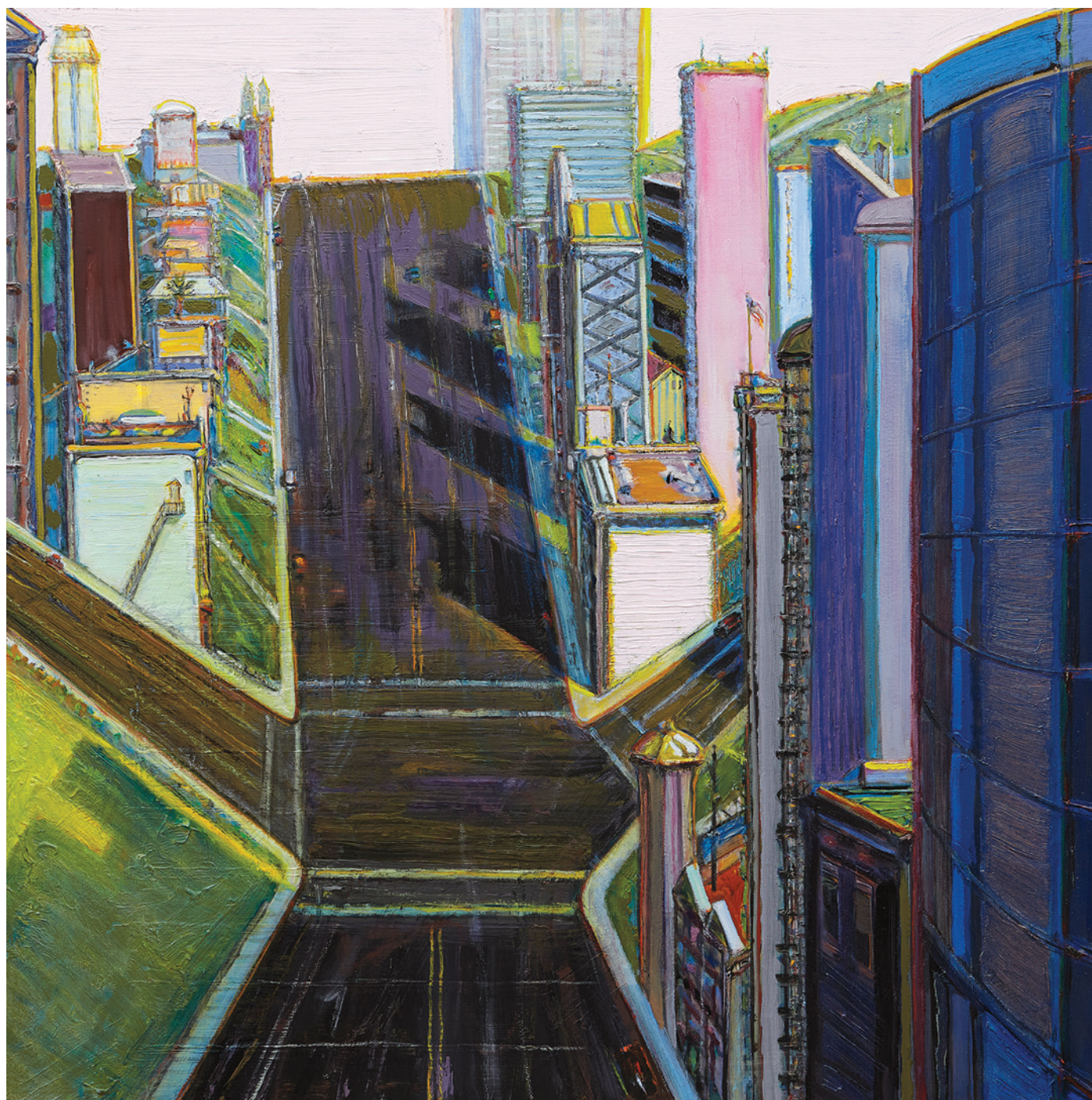


WAYNE THIEBAUD

Intersection Buildings, 2000–2014
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in



ART © WAYNE THIEBAUD/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY
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DON SKILES Iron City

In those days, so long ago now that they seem like a black-and-white movie, grainy and flaring, he rode a noisy diesel bus to a stop downtown in Pittsburgh and got off and walked up the hill to the college. It was actually a university, the enrollment was around six thousand or so, but it wasn't the one he had wanted to attend, not even third or fourth in the list, for that matter. But he could commute, live at home, and that proved the decision maker.

He used to ride a streetcar out through the leafy Oakland area, where Carnegie Tech (as it was called then) and the University of Pittsburgh were, and there was the elite women's college, Chatham, in Shadyside, but nobody like him ventured there at all. In the fall, he would see the frat men sitting out on the porches of their houses, wearing khakis and dirty white bucks, smiling; some had stylish horn-rimmed glasses, with crew cuts, buzz cuts, and he thought he would like to look like they did, and sit on the porch and bullshit, and somebody else paid the tab, wrote checks for you. What would it be like to go to college like that? On the weekends they had house parties, grilled hamburgers and hot dogs outside in the tangy fall air, and drank beer. *Iron City* (although his uncle had loudly proclaimed, "Worse damn beer I ever drank."), *Duquesne* ("Have a Duke!"), *Rolling Rock*.

He had an alcoholic priest for his 8:00 a.m. English class. The priest smelled of sour wine, and a deeper, older, dusty smell. His black robes made an odd swishing sound, a sort of rustle, when he entered the room and mounted the small platform where the instructor's desk was, which he always sat behind. He never moved from it—even when they handed in their essays, they carried them to him, sitting there, with a high red flush in his sallow waxy cheeks, the veins broken and purple in his long, thin nose. In the winter, the priest's nose dripped, and he had sat in fascination and discomfort, waiting for a drop to fall, or the priest to finally yank a dirty yellowed handkerchief from his sleeve and wipe it. "Disgusting, disgusting," the guy behind had muttered, several times. "Jesus!" But the priest was also somewhat hard of hearing, and did not notice.

The priest gave him scrawled B- grades on his essays, invariably, and he wondered if he actually read them. When would he read them, for that matter? In the stone and brick building where the priests lived, off by the library,

maybe in there, drinking a glass of wine and muttering, and still wiping his nose.

The college had a very good basketball team, a nationally ranked one, but he never saw any of the players, and neither did anyone else he spoke to. He would go to the lounge and play hearts with several people he knew there, for something to do, especially when it was cold and windy, up there on The Hill, as it was called, although it was also called The Bluff. It was said there had been some kind of French and Indian War fort up there—Fort Duquesne. But there were no indications of this on the campus, at least that he could see. Maybe it was a French fort—the name *Duquesne* was French.

He was increasingly wondering how long he could stay at the university, because his money was dwindling, and there didn't seem to be a realistic way to get more. He thought of talking to his history professor about it—he had had him to his book-strewn office, and had spent over an hour talking to him, urging him to consider majoring in history. Were there scholarships in history? He hadn't asked, embarrassed at his raw need of money. The professor was somebody he deeply admired, and envied. What would it be like to live such a life? He actually knew little about him—he had graduated from a Canadian university, which was a little odd, and he once told the class there was a street in Cambridge, England, the university town, named after a branch of his family.

The professor took an interest in him, and he wondered why. The professor—Dr. Blaisdell—told him outright the second time they met in his book-strewn office (if he ever had an office, he'd want it to look just like this one, he thought) that he was extremely smart, and asked him “What are your plans?”

“I don't really have any plans . . .” How could he tell him that since he didn't have any money, he couldn't plan? People without money have dreams, fantasies, relief from those—but plans are out of the question. The adults he knew often talked, around the dinner table, about not getting too big for your britches, and making “big plans.” They would invariably burst, like a bubble, in your face. He had to believe they knew what they were talking about, but he also had a nagging sense that there was a whole conversation, an entire way of thinking, that they simply ignored. Or did not know about. That made him uncomfortable,

made him feel like a traitor to his people, his class. In any case, once you got married, the jig was up. How could you go to college, and be married, have children? It was so clearly an impossibility.

“I'll tell you—you won't find what you're looking for in a bottle, or a whore's belly, either. Between her legs. A fertile ditch . . .” Professor Blaisdell had said with intensity.

What was he talking about? Somehow they had got on the subject of drinking, carousing? Had he made up a story, to divert the man, throw him off the scent, as it were?

“I was a student once myself. Students forget that every professor before them was once where they are. In the class, in a seat, taking notes, wondering if they can pass the next exam.”

That was true, no doubt. But, still, there were some significant differences. If you had to work all the time, that was one, a big one.

“I might join the service . . . the Air Force, I've thought of that.”

Blaisdell's face flushed, and he wheeled around from the window he'd been standing at, looking out. It faced the Lower Hill District, an area that few knew any real facts about, since it was a place of Negroes, none of whom—except for those playing on the nationally ranked basketball team—came to the university. There was something very wrong about that, he knew—everybody knew—but nobody talked about it.

“Join the service! Somebody with the brains you've got? Be an *enlisted* man? Do you have any idea what that means? At all?”

His brother had been in the Marine Corps. But he had to admit that his brother was no supporter of the Corps, and in fact said, when asked about “the Corps,” “I tell you what, I saw more good men broken in there than made—whatever that means.” It was a heretical statement, deeply shocking to some sitting around that dinner table. But it came from a veteran, so it was hard to deal with.

Blaisdell wasn't waiting for him to reply. He often did that in class. “No—I'll tell you. For you to join the military—whatever branch—is simply a terrible waste of ability, of talent, of brains. Even if you were to be able to get a commission—are you in ROTC? Wait—of course you are, you're only a freshman.”

All able-bodied males were required to take ROTC

their freshman and sophomore years. “Military Science,” the courses were called. They were taught by uniformed officers. Then, there was organized drill, marching, learning how to strip down a rifle blindfolded. The latter was explained as being necessary because you never knew when you might have to clean your rifle in the dark. This statement, made by a young captain to the class, had really made him wonder about its veracity—a word his philosophy professor liked to use. Was it really the case that such an event was even “likely”? He had wanted to ask the captain to specifically say how and when such an eventuality could occur, how often it was likely, but he had known this would result in the captain focusing on him from then on out. He had also known, in that class and at that time, that he was not a military type, whatever that was. He asked too many questions, and needed to ask them. So in an unexpected way, the lesson had been valuable for him. He would not be one to continue on, as a junior and senior, in the ROTC, and graduate with a commission and officer rank, and thus be able to select which branch of the military he wanted to serve in.

Blaisdell had had to prepare for an upcoming medieval history class that day, and so their meeting had been truncated—his word. And it had been leaving that meeting, his mind swirling with a thousand different thoughts in a million different directions, that he had run into the girl he sat behind in a large lecture class in psychology. She had a beautiful neck—he was amazed at his attraction to her neck, and the feelings it aroused in him. College was obviously a place where you learned much, not just “in the class.”

Her name was Mary Ann Filardi, an Italian name, he took it. She had dark black hair, worn long, and dark brown eyes. He found himself wondering if she was Catholic, if she was truly religious—then, too, there were all those rumors and myths—and they probably were myths, he thought, about “Catholic girls.” Why did those exist?

“You know, if you marry one—and that's what they want, always remember that, they want you to marry them!—you have to convert to *being one*. And you have to swear to raise your children as *Catholics*, too. Think of that.”

He made a joke, surprising himself, talking to her, after apologizing for nearly knocking her down. “I was meeting with Dr. Blaisdell. Discussing ways to avoid the draft.”

She looked solemnly at him. Mary Ann was a serious girl, he could feel that, already in her young life. She took things seriously. Probably wasn't in a sorority, and certainly hadn't been a cheerleader or a majorette in high school. “No, you weren't. Blaisdell, he wouldn't advise you on evading the draft.”

“Not evading—avoiding. Different things.”

“Do you think we'll have to fight the Russians? I can't think that,” she said, frowning. “They are decent people. Like the Czechs.” There was a big settlement of Czechs near where Mary Ann lived, in an area called Boho Hill. They had come to work in the mills, at the turn of the century, the story had it, but his mother said they were glassmakers. “They make cut glass—dishes, vases. Crystal! Beautiful things.” His aunt's large display cabinet was full of the stuff, he knew. Candy dishes, his brother called them.

“What about the Hungarians?” he suddenly said, and wondered why he'd said it. “The Russians invaded them, didn't they? Tanks in the streets of Budapest.”

She nodded her head, “I know . . .”

He scuffed a small pile of leaves on the walkway with his shoe. What was it that made you feel so awkward talking to some girls? He had thought of asking his older brother, as he sat at the kitchen table eating limburger cheese and pickles, a disgusting combination if ever there was one. How could he eat that? But he had also picked up the intimation that there was something wrong with *him* for not liking the smelly cheese and the big pickles.

“Did you get a chance to listen to that DJ?”

“The radio—yes! Porky Phillips!”

Porky Phillips was a nighttime disc jockey on WILY, a station emanating from the Lower Hill District. It was said to play “race” music, rhythm and blues, especially. On Phillips's show, you could hear records, groups, you heard nowhere else. Some were not even in record stores, although he had heard they were available in the Lower Hill District.

“So—what did you think?” What would she think, he wondered? The music was suggestive, that was for sure. She seemed like a very nice girl. She had said her father liked the cartoons of somebody he'd never heard of. She said they were “different,” whatever that meant.

“They say a lot of it comes out of Cleveland. Detroit. Chicago. Buffalo—there's some guy up there, on after

midnight, if you can pick it up . . . Phillips, the other day, claimed they never heard of this music out on the West Coast . . . and it makes me think of those places, those cities? I'd like to go there, see what it's really like."

She nodded. "It's a big country . . ." She sighed, and shifted her books from one arm to the other. "You wonder if you'll live here—you know, in Pittsburgh—for the rest of your life."

"There could be worse things," he said, but as soon as he'd said it, he knew it wasn't right. "I don't know—I just feel, what I'm looking for, I'm not going to find it here."

"I understand . . ." she said. "I feel the same thing, sometimes . . ."

In the earlier autumn, the campus had been a beautiful place, a kind of island in the middle of an ugly area of the city. Blaisdell had made comparisons to the medieval universities, the town and gown, in his medieval history class. In a way, it was an apt comparison.

"Maybe I'll go to San Francisco," he said, looking down toward the city in its haze. "You know what they say . . ."

"No, I don't know what they say," Mary Ann said, a bit petulantly, not like her.

He sighed. "They say—Oscar Wilde said—that it's a curious thing, but everyone who goes missing turns up in San Francisco."

She said nothing for a while, and he began to feel uneasy. He'd overstepped some kind of boundary.

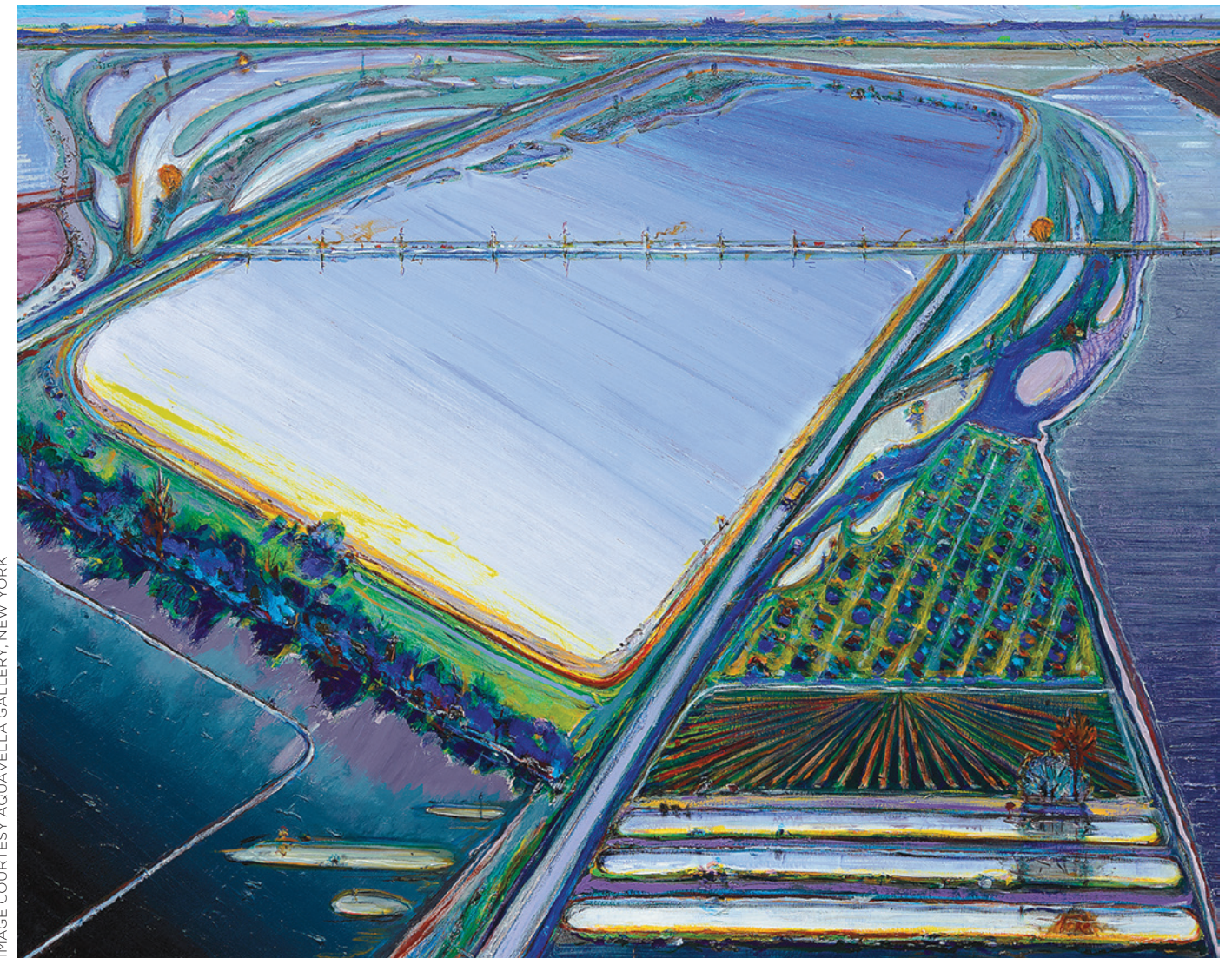
"It's a long way, San Francisco. A long way away."

"Yes. It is," he said, and felt his heart contract at the thought of how far it was.

WAYNE THIEBAUD

Flood Waters, 2006/2013

Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in



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IMAGE COURTESY AGUA VELLA GALLERY, NEW YORK

Don Skiles's fiction has appeared in many magazines, including *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *MungBeing*, *Gargoyle*, *Over the Transom*, and *West Branch*, and in two previous collections, *Miss America and Other Stories*, and *The James Dean Jacket Story*. Pelekinesis published his novel *Football* in 2014 and will publish a new collection of short fiction, *Rain After Midnight*, in 2017.