

DAVID CAMPBELL

A Real Pandora's Box, 2015
Oil on Linen, 22 x 17 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JANA HARRIS

The Blame

I didn't know any of them. Their lives had nothing to do with mine. None of them lived in my neighborhood, their homes were down in the flatlands. I had nothing in common with them. At the time the average person moved every three years—a lot of people were relocating. Sometimes the wind carried their hectic music up the hill, but I don't recall when I stopped hearing it. They were just gone one day. It was none of my business. Our lives never overlapped; they became just a smudge in my memory. Maybe they didn't like living out here—it's not for everyone. I live an isolated life, but it's not as if I live in a gated community; we all share the same access road. There had always been a lot of red-white-and-blue For Sale signs in that neighborhood; we were inured to them and never spoke of it. It's just what happens in a business climate. Didn't everyone feel the pinch? All of us were at least a little overextended. Everyone was going around with a dark face, so if you couldn't say something nice, it was best not to say anything at all. I had my own troubles. Who needed to take on more anxiety? It wasn't as if someone put a gun to their heads and made them buy a house they couldn't afford. It wasn't as if we lived in a dictatorship. If you didn't pay your bills, you lost your property; sympathy and empathy didn't come into it. It's what you expected if you didn't have a workable financial plan. When I started to see lights left on all night in widows without drapes,

I knew something was going on, but I didn't know what. There were so many rumors, it was impossible to get at the truth. I thought they must have needed to relocate before their homes were sold. After they moved away a lot of junk overflowed into the street in front of their houses, blighting the landscape—torn couches, broken swing sets, old suitcases. When the rains came, the rubble melted into their yards. Eventually, Hispanic men driving U-Haul trucks arrived and carried the trash away to the county dump, which was very inconvenient. We had to wait in longer-than-usual lines just to dump our trash. When I drove past their neighborhood, I sometimes caught a glimpse of a white foreclosure notice nailed to a door. Or a yellow sheriff's auction sign posted at the beginning of a cul-de-sac of homes built on land that was once a forest and when that was cut down, a lake and when that was drained, a development. One thought: What is going on here? Why doesn't the government do something? I wouldn't say that I was untroubled by the contrast between my life and the lives of the people who once lived in those homes. But I wouldn't say that I led a pampered existence either. I have no idea where they went or what happened to them. Later there was finger pointing and talk of criminal behavior, but never a trial. No one was held accountable. According to the politicians it was more important to look to the future and get the economy going again. Eventually a crew of different Hispanic men arrived in unmarked utility trucks and replaced the gutters and mowed the lawns. New red-white-and-blue For Sale signs appeared and new people moved in. I don't know any of them. Their lives have nothing to do with mine. It's none of my business.

Jana Harris teaches creative writing at the University of Washington and The Writer's Workshop in Seattle. Her most recent publications are *You Haven't Asked About My Wedding or What I Wore: Poems of Courtship on the American Frontier* (University of Alaska Press) and a memoir, *Horses Never Lie About Love* (Free Press, Simon & Schuster).