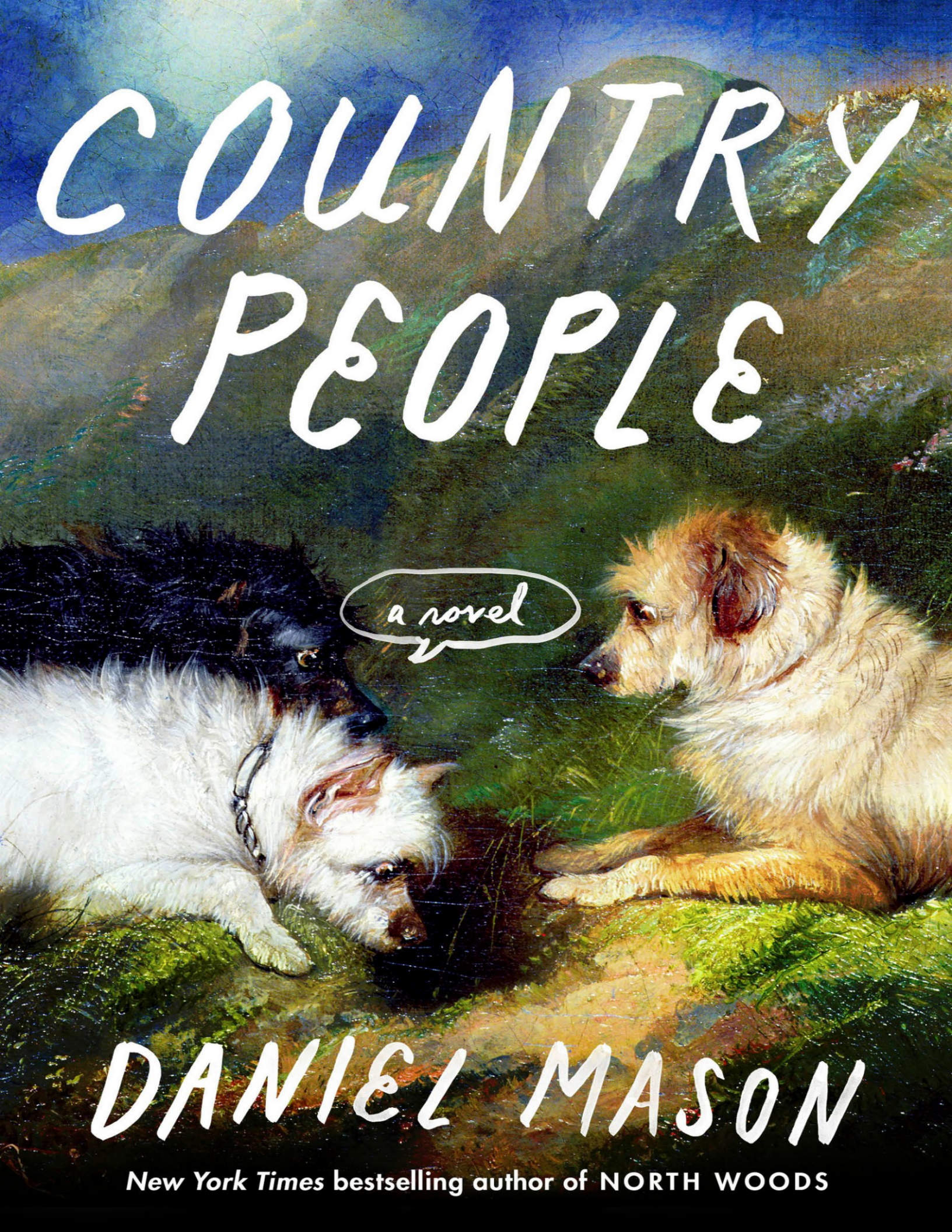


COUNTRY PEOPLE



a novel

DANIEL MASON

New York Times bestselling author of NORTH WOODS

BY DANIEL MASON

Country People

North Woods

A Registry of My Passage upon the Earth

The Winter Soldier

A Far Country

The Piano Tuner

Country People



A NOVEL

Daniel Mason



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Acknowledgments

About the Author

For Josh Mooney

...what we by day
Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind,
One night or two with wanton growth derides
Tending to wild.

PARADISE LOST



...And so my path descended, through the twisting caverns. I had but a single candle, and its flame sputtered in the damp air, as if I were entering Darkness itself. Were I to drop it, I would be lost forever, and my faithful little dog as well. But something drew me forward...Down, down! Crouching at times to squeeze through narrow passages, wading over subterranean streams, scrambling across fallen stones, one foot before the next. Creatures watched me from the darkness, shuffling forms I caught only in fragments: a wing, an eye, a slithering back.

How much time had passed since I'd last eaten, I didn't know—the world outside seemed to belong to another life entirely. Soon my stomach began to gnaw with hunger. Was I to dine on snake, on bat? But the Mystery drew me forward. For all my isolation deep within the earth, I felt that man had gone before me. Was this a footprint in the clay, a handprint on the walls?

The eyes play tricks in darkness!

My little dog barked. Did she know where we were going? Was she urging me onwards? Or did she fear this journey was nothing but a descent into our tomb?

Deep, deep; down, down! And just when I thought that I could go no farther, and my feet had grown so heavy, and my flame flickered on a final inch of candle, and my clothes, torn to rags, fell from my body, I saw, at the end of a narrowing corridor, a light, and, hastening towards it, naked as a babe, found myself before a door, which, opening, revealed, in splendor and immensity, a dazzling, vanished world.

Spend any time in this corner of Vermont, with its lonely woods and narrow roads, talk to the hunters, to the old loggers or the farmers—and sooner or later you are going to hear the story.

At first it will come to you in scraps. The quarry where a body was found, the cavern with its strange echoes, the old Windmaker farm, its silo overgrown with creeper—long abandoned, everybody says, and yet you’d swear you’d seen, you’d heard...

Or maybe you’ll find one of the objects, like melted knots of iron, turned up by your shovel or denting your scythe.

“Local Legends,” *The Greensbury Trumpet*, July 17,

1982

It is our habit, when asked to imagine a mountain, to think only of its exterior, its peaks and crags, its wooded slopes and tumbling waterfalls, the creatures that inhabit it, the circling birds and chattering squirrels, the climbers scaling its turrets with their picks and ropes.

But this is only a small part of a mountain, the thinnest of veneers. What of the cathedral within it? What of the molten channels snaking through our volcanoes, the granite slabs that compose our cordilleras, the deeper folds of schist and gneiss, the strata and unconformities, the slate and sandstone?

Because a mountain is also this. Or might I say: a mountain is *mostly* this. For every terrestrial stream, there run a thousand below the earth. For each pond, a hundred inner seas. And waterfalls, and airy marbled chambers painted with every color of the atmospheric rainbow, and more. *That* is a mountain. The one we see is but a fleeting apparition. It is as if I were to ask you, “What makes a man?” and you think only of his skin.

E. Blossfeldt, “Rocks and Drills: Why Should We
Care?,” *The Proceedings of the Jeremiah Wylkes
Society*, Volume 14, Number 1

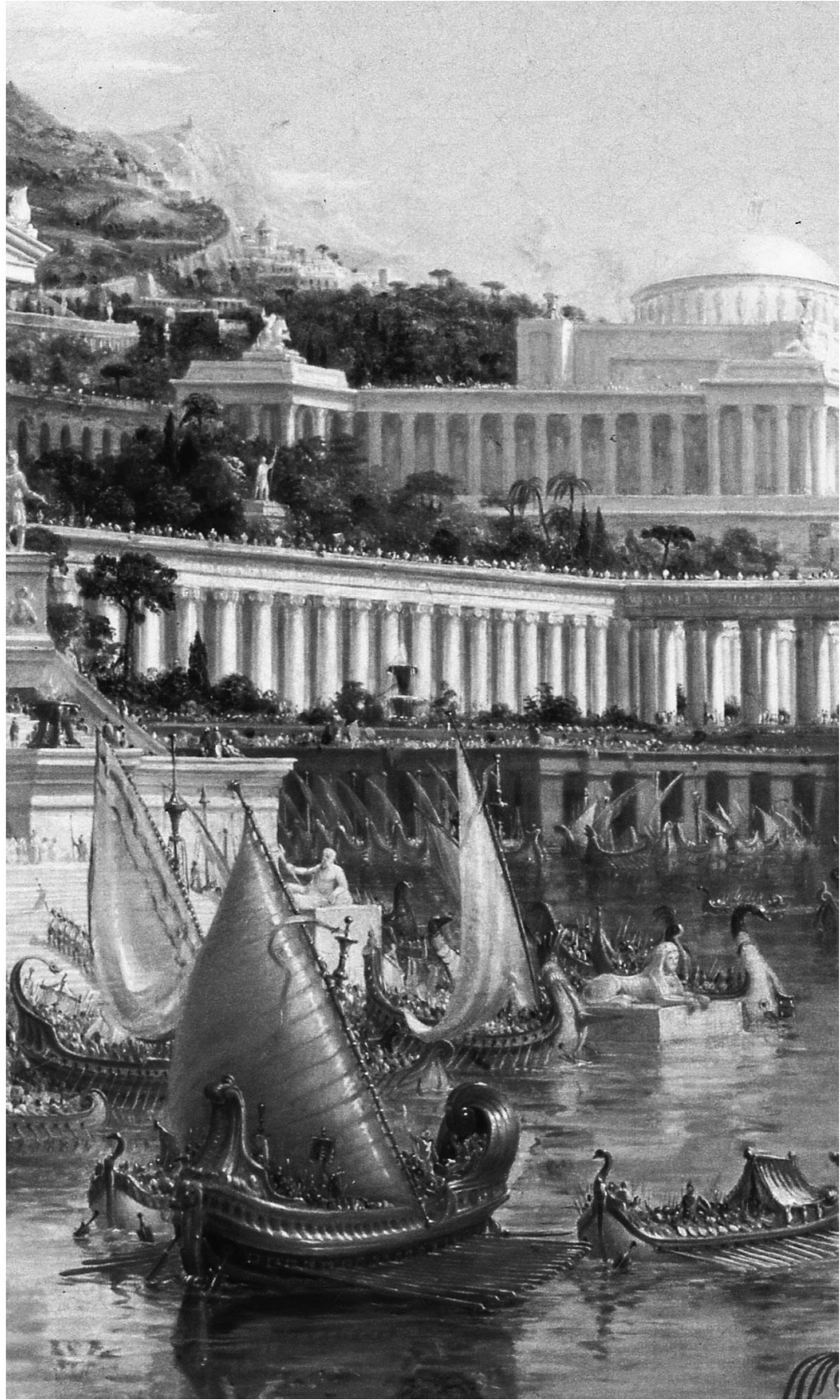
In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, there lived a fisherman who wished he might be someone other than the person that he was. All day long he sat by the banks of the great river and watched the fish, dreaming of following them on their long journeys.

One day, when he was lying in this wistful state, he saw a golden fish among the silvery schools, twice the size of all the others. Here and there it swam, until, all of a sudden, it stepped from the river and became a beautiful maiden, dressed in a robe of water that shimmered about her body as she walked. She did not even seem to notice him, but walked on by, leaving footprints of shining water.

Rising from his broken torpor, he followed her, up the riverbank, to a great willow tree that he had never seen before, though he had been coming there his entire life. Then, with each step, she became smaller and smaller, until, just as she reached the tree, she became a fox and disappeared within a foxhole.

The fisherman followed her gleaming prints to the base of the tree, where he crouched and peered into the darkness. More than anything in the world he wished to follow her, to love her, though he did not know if she were maiden, fish, or fox.

“Two Kings, Two Kingdoms,” from *An Anthology of
Russian Folktales*, Random House, 1978





One



The wife had been offered a one-year visiting professorship at a college in Vermont, and the husband was married to the wife.

They had two children, a son and a daughter. The plan was for the husband to finish the first draft of his dissertation, which he had been working on for fourteen years, twelve years longer than intended. But a week before they departed, they read an article describing the “child-care deserts” of rural America, so he knew deep down in his heart that he would be watching their kids.

The truth was that he already knew this, because this is what had happened at their home in the city, which was not a child-care desert. But the college was prestigious, an exciting opportunity for the family, an adventure.

And he loved deserts! As a boy, he had been to the Grand Canyon, and kept a “Creatures of the Southwest” poster on his wall.

—

They had driven there from California, because of the dog, whom they couldn’t bear to put in cargo.

In the beginning, the dog sat in the back, between the two children. They had cleared a spot. By Sacramento, the spot was needed for a box of Goldfish crackers the size of the daughter, and the dog had hopped over the divide and settled in the husband’s lap, where it remained. It was assertive and

warm, with warm, cadaveric breath, and each time the husband tried to move it, it adopted a posture of such defiant deadweight that he felt as if he were lifting a dog-shaped bag of water. At night, in the motel showers, he could still see the imprint of its talons on his legs.

The wife reminded him that the correct word was “paw,” not a difficult word to remember.

The dog was a breed called a Lagotto Romagnolo, from Italy, which the husband was always embarrassed to share, because it sounded like a luxury sports car, while the truth was the dog had cost the same as every other dog during the pandemic, but it was the first hypoallergenic dog to come off waiting lists in California, Oregon, Arizona, Nevada, and Idaho. Every other dog was taken. The family had written pleading letters, sat for interviews, submitted videos of their home, videos of their children, and each time they had been rejected by the cabal of profiteering breeders who saw that time of suffering as a moment to assert their superiority over desperate, allergic professionals homebound with their kids.

They had named the dog Giuseppe, after Arcimboldo, after Garibaldi, after Verdi, to honor his Italian roots.

Their son had discovered the breed on the Internet during Zoom school. In addition to not shedding, it had the virtue of being bred for truffle hunting, which meant that at least one member of the family would have a useful skill when society broke down. In online forums, the dog was praised for its gentleness and soft fur and interesting coloration, which changed as it got older, though some people cautioned that unless you really intended it to hunt truffles, what you were buying was an animal genetically selected to go crazy over secret, pungent morsels of which humans were blissfully unaware.

—

When the wife had received the offer to teach, she was also offered housing in the Visiting Faculty Residence, which on the website of the college

appeared to be a light-filled modern structure, with basketball and tennis courts, and a playground, just on the edge of campus. It seemed, in fact, almost identical to their California faculty apartment, though when the husband studied the photo on the webpage more closely, he noticed that all the cars were twenty years old. This was the first warning sign. The second warning sign was an actual warning, from the grad-school friend who had helped arrange the invitation: under no terms should they ever stay in the Visiting Faculty Residence, which had been built by an avant-garde Colombian architect, very famous, revolutionary. As in the tropical country Colombia, she added. As in the one without a winter. The year before, a Finnish scholar had suffered frostbite in her bedroom. As in the Arctic country Finland, she said.

This struck the wife and husband as hyperbolic. Every university had its history of architectural tragedy. How bad could it really get? And the wife, whose California office had beautiful floor-to-ceiling windows that had been blocked, in the seventies, by a four-foot-high “brise-soleil” of concrete, thought for a bit, as did the husband, who had to ascend three floors from his basement office to reach a bathroom with urinals arranged in a rosette to foster creativity and communication. But what were they to do?

Their friend set out to find who might be on sabbatical, and after some inquiries, they received an email from a professor of economics. What fortune! He was looking for a house sitter. And he wouldn't charge them anything; he needed someone to look after the place, to watch for leaks, to keep the animals away.

Such generosity, not to mention the casual animal reference, should have been a warning, but for simple city people, it was not.

—

And so they set out. The wife drove, and the husband, who already had a few moving violations, sat under the dog. In the back were the boy, the girl, the

Goldfish crackers, and a pair of potholder looms, gifts from the wife's mother.

For the husband, the appeal of a potholder loom had remained one of the durable mysteries of parenthood; part of him was proud that, in an age of all-consuming electronic media and dwindling attention spans, his very bright nine-year-old child could be occupied for hours making potholders, though he was less certain about his twelve-year-old. But the loom kept the children occupied until Nebraska, when the seven bags of vibrant multicolored loops ran out.

"Look at the view," said the wife, when the kids began to complain, though there was no view—it wasn't that it was monotonous or featureless, or whatever the unimaginative coastal elite might say about the landscape of the extraordinary American heartland, just that the highway had been embedded in said heartland in such a way that they could see nothing but ten feet of grassy verge, for hundreds of miles. They could not agree on a podcast, the books were in the trunk, and although the husband could have climbed back over the seats under normal circumstances, now there was the dog. So the husband told them a story.

—

The story was one of many stories the husband had encountered in graduate school, where over the past fourteen years his dissertation topic had drifted—geographically, chronologically, thematically. He'd begun with an obscure troubadour, taken three years to learn that he was obscure for a reason, switched to Rabelais without telling his adviser, then the body in Rabelais, then monsters in Rabelais, then monsters in French folktales, each great fun, but none of which led anywhere concrete. It might have been pathetic had he not loved the books, the stories, the paths they took him down, the laughter, outsized and impossible. But time was ticking. By then his first adviser had died; his second seemed to have forgotten he existed. Well, perhaps Western