

An excerpt from the chapter “Winter,” from *In the North of Our Lives*

Thirty below on a windy December night, with the waxing moon high in the sky. I climb out of the spruce, away from Warden’s Grove and the Thelon River. Hard snow crunches underfoot, and each inhaled breath is ragged in my nose. Overhead the aurora dances in ribbons of color- purple, yellow, and green curtains streaming through the sky. From the crest of the hill, the Barrens lies clothed in a liquid, silver light- a great, undulating sweep of land locked in the grip of winter. Below, the Thelon gleams gently, its frozen current shining in the brittle night. And everywhere is a silence so deep that it has become palpable; the wind is here, but as a part of the silence that streams out of the desolate land. It is as though I could reach out and hold the silence, cupping it, ever so gently, in my mittened hands. I recall the words of Meister Eckehart, a fourteenth-century German mystic: “There is nothing in creation so like God as stillness.” His words hover in the quiet of the expectant night; I huddle in the lee of some stunted trees and drifted snow, desiring warmth yet unwilling to leave the ridge and hear myself move. No matter how many days and nights pass, no matter how many sunrises and sunsets greet me, no matter how many disappointments there are - moments when the fabric of the trip seems to be ripping apart under the strain of our disagreements, or outside forces - there will always be this view, and a sense of having come to an appointed place, drawn by whatever it is that marks the stillness and the course of my life. I tell myself to hold onto a quiet heart, and the empty land, for they offer the hope of grace at times when grace does not seem possible.

When I become conscious of my shivering, I begin the descent, walking back as quietly as possible, guided by the familiar landmarks and soft lamplight from our cabin - a single beam that rushes out into the night, only to be swallowed by the Barrens, by the empty land that seems to go on forever, until it finally dissolves in the winds of space.