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Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

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Northing [End of I]

In autumn the winding passage of ravens from the north heralds the great fall migration of caribou. The shaggy-necked birds spread their wing tips to the skin of convection currents rising, and hie them south. The great deer meet herd on herd in arctic and sub-arctic valleys, milling and massing and gathering force like a water-fall, till they pour across the barren grounds wide as a tidal wave. Their coats are new and fine. Their thin spring coats—which had been scraped off in great hunks by the southern forests and were riddled with blackfly and gadfly stings, warble and botfly maggots—are gone, and a lustrous new pelage has appeared, a luxurious brown fur backed by a plush layer of hollow hairs that insulate and waterproof. Four inches of creamy fat cover even their backs. A loose cartilage in their fetlocks makes their huge strides click, mile upon mile over the tundra south to the shelter of trees, and you can hear them before they've come and after they've gone, rumbling like rivers, ticking like clocks.

The Eskimos' major caribou hunt is in the fall, when the deer are fat and their hides thick. If some whim or weather shifts the northern caribou into another valley, some hidden, unexpected valley, then even to this day some inland Eskimo tribes may altogether starve.

Up on the Arctic Ocean coasts, Eskimos dry the late summer's fish on drying racks, to use throughout the winter as feed for dogs. The newly forming sea ice is elastic and flexible. It undulates without cracking as the roiling sea swells and subsides, and it bends and sags under the Eskimos' weight as they walk, spreading leviathan ripples out toward the horizon, so that they seem to be walking and bouncing on the fragile sheath of the world's balloon. During these autumn days Eskimo adults and children alike play at cat's cradle, a game they have always known. The intricate string patterns looped from their fingers were thought to "tangle the sun" and so "delay its disappearance." Later when the sun sets for the winter, children will sled down any snowy slope, using as sleds frozen seal embryos pulled with thongs through the nose.

These northings drew me, present northings, past northings, the thought of northings. In the literature of arctic exploration, the talk is of northing. An explorer might scrawl in his tattered journal, "Latitude 82° 15' N. We accomplished 20 miles of northing today, in spite of the shifting pack." Shall I go northing? My legs are long.

A skin-colored sandstone ledge beside me was stained with pokeberry juice, like an altar bloodied. The edges of the scarlet were dissolved, faded to lymph like small blood from a wound. As I looked, a maple leaf suddenly screeched across the rock, arched crabwise on its points, and a yellow-spotted dog appeared from noplance, bearing in its jaws the leg of a deer. The hooves of the deer leg were pointed like a dancer's toes. I have felt dead deer legs before, some local butchers keep them as weapons. They are greaseless and dry; I can feel the little bones. The dog was coming towards me on the path. I spoke to him and stepped aside; he loped past, looking neither to the right nor the left.