The Nature Book is a novel that collages nature descriptions from 300 other novels into a single, seamless text; it includes no original language. With the background brought to the fore, patterns emerge in how we think and write about nature; the resulting narrative is shaped by these patterns. This is an excerpt from Part I, “The Four Seasons,” at the end of a long, frigid winter.

There had not been such a winter for years. Every night — bone-cracking cold. Every morning the world flung itself over and the view had changed, appearing a shade lighter, but the country was of a deadly and a deceitful sameness. The same day returned once again — the same waste of snow and rock very lonely and austere.

It snowed every day now, sometimes only brief flurries that powdered the snow
crust, sometimes for real. On the coldest days the snowdrifts were deep and the pine needles in the glades were ossified with ice. On the days when the sun shone, it was only an instant. A bright speck. Then it was gone.

One could not imagine that matters could get worse, but they did. In a matter of weeks, in a blizzard, how it snowed so hard. Raged for forty-eight hours. Animals that occupied the land felt the wind of the blizzard increase, and overhead the sky grew dark with snow. The cold increased until it was thirty below zero. The very next morning when the snow finally ceased falling, quickly the passion went out of the sky. All the world was dark grey. Altogether changed. Although the breeze had now utterly ceased, the temperature had dropped ten degrees and made it memorable. On the north wall of the valley a mile away, seven deer had frozen on a rock.

Now the land itself seemed oppressed and banal in comparison to before. Two or three times before the awful storm was over, the white blur above the mountains caught the full fury of the rushing wind. Permanent ice began to form in the highest mountain valleys. It became only a matter of time until this valley was different, unreal and mocking, until the landscape and snow and ice were forever of the same shapeless pattern. More forlorn they were than stale bones.

A long time passed in such weather. Cold and intangible were all things in earth and heaven. Colder and intangible but more disquieting.

One cold winter morning, the patterns of cloud cover began to change slightly for the better. The wind was still blowing overhead. The snow was falling over the ice and turning to ice. The snow was falling over the ice and hiding the ice. The winter bareness spread drearily over it now, suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But just before noon the light changed. The snow had stopped after dumping a fresh eight inches on the old crust. The wind had dropped and it was less cold when, when, all of a sudden, thank the good God, some strange light flared up — died away.

There came a pause, a hiatus to the cold sky. There was the smell of wood even if just for a few minutes. A change of air. Of course, every tree within the valley was destroyed, but their scent, one that mingled sweetness and decay, at once filled one’s nostrils so completely that its very memory lingered for hours afterward.

When the light began to come back to life at once, it was the clump of clouds and vapours that flared in the sky. The sun was an angry little pinhead in the gloom. Though in a matter of minutes the nameless clouds opened and, lo! — all of a sudden, for the change was quick as lightning, the wonderful comparative smallness of the sun shot a broken and discoloured light that partially hung upon the shattered boughs and cast vast clouds and snow and ice and rocks into such vivid relief that for the first few moments the sense of distance and proportion was almost annulled. The sun stood high in the sky, staring down through the hole in a perforated cloud, waiting for animals and for the wind, for a moment. A few of those sudden shocks of joy that are so physical, so precisely marked, set out across the valley. The eye had an almost boundless range of craggy steeps, grey rock, bright ice, and looking up, the sunlight was a
veritable flood, crystal, limpid, sparkling, setting a feeling of gayety in the air, stirring up an effervescence in the blood, a tumult of exuberance in the veins.\textsuperscript{88}

The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression. His present aspect, coupled with the lack of all human forms in the scene, explained the old-time heliolatries in a moment. One could feel that a saner religion had never prevailed under the sky. The luminary was a golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature, gazing down in the vigour and intentness of youth upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him.\textsuperscript{89}

Eyes opened wide\textsuperscript{90} upon the glorious golden shaft of sunlight shining through the\textsuperscript{91} great clouds that sailed in masses.\textsuperscript{92} Light slanted, falling obliquely. Here it caught on the edge of a cloud and burnt it into a slice of light, a blazing island on which no foot could rest. Then another cloud was caught in the light and another and another, so that\textsuperscript{93} the sweep of flat land below the abrupt thrust of the mountains\textsuperscript{94} was burnished gold,\textsuperscript{95} arrow-struck with fiery feathered darts that shot erratically across the quivering\textsuperscript{96} tangle of reflections.\textsuperscript{97}

This light excited and upset.\textsuperscript{98} The valley was now much more pleasant than it had been before.\textsuperscript{99} But why? What was\textsuperscript{100} all this commotion? With just one glance\textsuperscript{101} the sun had stirred up\textsuperscript{102} the clouds that had loitered in the heavens.\textsuperscript{103} For weeks, — ay, months\textsuperscript{104} — winter had piled high drifts\textsuperscript{105} in every direction and as far as the horizon.\textsuperscript{106} Imagination completed what mere sight could not achieve.\textsuperscript{107} But now, with the sun overhead,\textsuperscript{108} it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering.\textsuperscript{109}

The sensation of sunlight overwhelmed,\textsuperscript{110} was undisturbed but by the wind, which broke at intervals in low and hollow murmurs from among the mountains.\textsuperscript{111} It was a strange sensation,\textsuperscript{112} and it grew, and grew. Till soon\textsuperscript{113} the clouds broke and drifted apart, shining white in a clear blue sky.\textsuperscript{114} The valley seemed an enchanted circle of glorious veils of gold and wraiths of white and silver haze and dim, blue, moving shade — beautiful and wild and unreal as a dream.\textsuperscript{115}

The valleys and divides lay in such a manner that\textsuperscript{116} this valley alone could reflect the great spatial majesty of the sky.\textsuperscript{117} Far to the south the mountains\textsuperscript{118} drifted in and out of the uncertain light of a moving cloud-cover like ghosts of mountains;\textsuperscript{119} there was no direct light\textsuperscript{120} whatever to be seen… But this too\textsuperscript{121} changed so gradually.\textsuperscript{122} Holes in the clouds\textsuperscript{123} spread a weird, unearthly light\textsuperscript{124} across the valley and a gold-edged rent in the clouds\textsuperscript{126} moved out over the flat lands beyond — now,\textsuperscript{128} stubbornly, inch by painful inch, it grew. It was the uncertainty and agony of its growth that were significant.\textsuperscript{129}

Presently the vapours slid aside,\textsuperscript{130} a rolling mass of clouds that just kept moving\textsuperscript{131} on and on. The cool wind moved over\textsuperscript{132} until the sky went clear\textsuperscript{133} across the mountains\textsuperscript{134} and valleys with wondrous modulations of light and shadow.\textsuperscript{135} Just like that, as if nothing had happened\textsuperscript{136} all winter long. Every winter every year\textsuperscript{137} seemed to dispart, and, through it, to roll clouds of\textsuperscript{138} inconceivable splendour; and unveiled a scene which in other circumstances\textsuperscript{139} would have been something sad, unutterably dreary.\textsuperscript{140}
Never had there been such weather. Every moment of the afternoon was full of new things and every hour the sunshine grew more golden on the ground. And it was still very cold — below freezing — but there was one nice thing. Something special in the wind. The storm was a thing of the past.

As the light grew, sounds joined the parade of perception — sparrows haggling among themselves, a blue jay's squawk of false excitement, the sharp warning of a cock quail on guard, and the answering whisper of the hen quail somewhere near. All these animals, and others, had felt so doomed up here in the eternal snow, as if there were no beyond. Now suddenly, as by a miracle, they had returned to avail themselves of the height of the ground, in order to examine the glorious, the truly glorious weather.

Other animals had gathered in the northeast corner of the valley and shone warmly in the light or giving off a dull, dry shine: martens, minks, ferrets, otters, weasels, badgers, ermines, foxes, and the small, gray-and-black tabby-striped wildcats. All these animals, and others, had fallen prey to the winter landscape. When they got out for a breath of country air, and Sunshine raced across the slope, it was something shocking. An animal with four legs — a beast — came trotting up the hill. Into the sun. Unlike the animals who knew only the present, this animal, overseeing its offspring proudly and tenderly, could look up into depths of pearly blue and see the golden world for what it was. Nightmare. Nothing but the nightmare had seemed real all winter long. Curds of bruised clouds hung motionless in the sky — memories of the bitter winter, but memories that the mourning wind carried across the treetops to distant east and west. It was hard to tell if this turn in the weather, these blessed calms, would last.

On the other side of the valley, another animal that had lost everything that winter came sludging through the snow. It was the sow bear, the mother, a huge, powerful, heavy thing breathing a stale breath of decayed old deer-hides and skunk cabbages and dead mushrooms.

The mother bear heard something. The sound repeated itself. It came from near at hand, from the thick shadow between the treetrunks on the hill. Then the bear went down on all fours made for the nearest tree. And waited, because even the bear, all hot cold dark in her fevered confusion, needed to think what was best to be done. The bear made a gurgling sound deep in her throat and bared her long, curved yellow-Ish teeth, so good at ripping and tearing. Suddenly, crash!

Two bear cubs burst from the bush and rushed pell-mell, tumbling head over heels straight for her. One flew flat on its face, bumping its nose and squealing. The other twisted in midair and landed in a heap on the ground, shaking its head in confusion. The bear boys looked at her, jumped forward.

The little cubs piled against their mother, clung to her. For a long time the giant bear sat calmly with them, deciding where to go. The sun moved on in its course. Then, in no hurry, they rose in one piece of dark fur. They moved as if across a swale of moon dust, bulky and wobbling, trapped in the idea of the nature of time.

By the time the sun was sinking, the hard stone of the day was cracked and light poured through its splinters. Red
and gold shot through in rapid running arrows, feathered with darkness — right through the mountains, through the valley, and then the sky. Erratically rays of light flashed and wandered through the clouds. In the buttery yellow light.
86 David Copperfield, Charles Dickens  
87 The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde  
88 The Octopus, Frank Norris  
89 Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Thomas Hardy  
90 Bless Me, Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya  
91 Riders of the Purple Sage, Zane Grey  
92 Middlemarch, George Eliot  
93 The Waves, Virginia Woolf  
94 The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Wallace Stegner  
95 Gods Without Men, Hari Kunzru  
96 The Waves, Virginia Woolf  
97 Lord of the Flies, William Golding  
98 The Sea, the Sea, Iris Murdoch  
99 Centennial, James Michener  
100 State of Wonder, Ann Patchett  
101 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
102 Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston  
103 Frankenstein, Mary Shelley  
104 The Prairie, James Fenimore Cooper  
105 The Clan of the Cave Bear, Jean M. Auel  
106 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
107 Star Maker, Olaf Stapledon  
108 Sea of Poppies, Amitav Ghosh  
109 The Song of the Lark, Willa Cather  
110 The Lowland, Jhumpa Lahiri  
111 A Sizilian Romance, Ann Radcliffe  
112 Women in Love, D. H. Lawrence  
113 Dracula, Bram Stoker  
114 Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder  
115 Riders of the Purple Sage, Zane Grey  
116 The Conquest, Oscar Micheaux  
117 House Made of Dawn, N. Scott Momaday  
118 All the Pretty Horses, Cormac McCarthy  
119 All the Pretty Horses, Cormac McCarthy  
120 The People in the Trees, Hanya Yanagihara  
121 Big Sur, Jack Kerouac  
122 The Clan of the Cave Bear, Jean M. Auel  
123 Sometimes a Great Notion, Ken Kesey  
124 Women in Love, D. H. Lawrence  
125 East of Eden, John Steinbeck  
126 Ethan Frome, Edith Wharton  
127 East of Eden, John Steinbeck  
128 Cities of the Plain, Cormac McCarthy  
129 Hawaii, James Michener  
130 Moby-Dick, Herman Melville  
131 The Round House, Louise Erdrich  
132 Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder  
133 The Round House, Louise Erdrich  
134 The Virginian, Owen Wister  
135 Middlemarch, George Eliot  
136 The Round House, Louise Erdrich  
137 Sometimes a Great Notion, Ken Kesey  
138 St. Irvyne, Percy Bysshe Shelley  
139 A Sizilian Romance, Ann Radcliffe  
140 The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne  
141 The Mountain Lion, Jean Stafford  
142 The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett  
143 Rendezvous with Rama, Arthur C. Clarke  
144 Moby-Dick, Herman Melville  
145 And Then There Were None, Agatha Christie  
146 Watership Down, Richard Adams  
147 East of Eden, John Steinbeck  
148 2001: A Space Odyssey, Arthur C. Clarke  
149 Women in Love, D. H. Lawrence  
150 The Prairie, James Fenimore Cooper  
151 Molloy, Samuel Beckett  
152 Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy  
153 Housekeeping, Marilynne Robinson  
154 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
155 The Clan of the Cave Bear, Jean M. Auel  
156 2001: A Space Odyssey, Arthur C. Clarke  
157 Plainsong, Kent Haruf  
158 Pain, Vladimir Nabokov  
159 The Shipping News, Annie Proulx  
160 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
161 The Prairie, James Fenimore Cooper  
162 The Crossing, Cormac McCarthy  
163 The Revolt of the Cockroach People, Oscar Zeta Acosta  
164 2001: A Space Odyssey, Arthur C. Clarke  
165 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
166 The Song of the Lark, Willa Cather  
167 On the Road, Jack Kerouac  
168 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
169 In, Anna Kavan  
170 The Mountain Lion, Jean Stafford  
171 The Mountain Lion, Jean Stafford  
172 Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison  
173 The Sea-Wolf, Jack London  
174 Bless Me, Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya  
175 The U.P. Trail, Zane Grey  
176 The Song of the Lark, Willa Cather  
177 My Antonia, Willa Cather  
178 Moby-Dick, Herman Melville  
179 The White Peacock, D. H. Lawrence  
180 Life of Pi, Yann Martel  
181 Anne of the Island, Lucy Maud Montgomery  
182 Blood and Guts in High School, Kathy Acker  
183 The Birchbark House, Louise Erdrich  
184 The Octopus, Frank Norris  
185 The Birchbark House, Louise Erdrich  
186 Bear, Marian Engel  
187 The Sheltering Sky, Paul Bowles  
188 Centennial, James Michener  
189 Sometimes a Great Notion, Ken Kesey  
190 The Birchbark House, Louise Erdrich  
191 The U.P. Trail, Zane Grey  
192 The Birchbark House, Louise Erdrich  
193 White Noise, Don DeLillo  
194 Gods Without Men, Hari Kunzru  
195 The Waves, Virginia Woolf  
196 The Mountain Lion, Jean Stafford  
197 House Made of Dawn, N. Scott Momaday  
198 The Waves, Virginia Woolf  
199 Sometimes a Great Notion, Ken Kesey