

Real North

by Jay Lake

What always was

A thirty day slog beyond the crest of the Rimerock Range, weather's frigid enough for the wind to freeze out and fall as dry, burning snow. Some proconsul back in the days of the Purple Empire sent men up this way to measure the air and the progress of the suns. When you come out of Last Pass there's a bronze stele they set up to mark where it can get that cold. There's writing on it, and glyphs, in six languages, four of them lost, but they all say the same thing:

The world ends here

Even though there's mountains beyond mountains, walls of ice two miles high, waterfalls frozen diamond bright and knife-sharp, the world does end there. Stand on the south side of the stele, you're so far north the suns ride the horizon like magnets on an Oelian gaming table. So far north the next day's sun can be seen coming from the infinite east before the last one has vanished into the infinite west.

South of the world, of course, is ocean beyond measure. Only here in the north is the world bounded by a border. This where the Real North begins.

At the end

"Knew a man oncet," said Jadetooth. Big fellow, greasy as a bear haunch, wore more layers of fur than a cannibal otter. He didn't say much, generally, spent words like they was breath to a drowning man. He grinned across the tiny cookfire. You didn't go with big flames in the Real North unless you were longing for unexpected company and maybe an early death.

Not a lot of late deaths up here, though, come to speak of it.

Facing away from the fire, Gristle grunted. "Ate a man once." He snorted, almost a laugh, probably rolling his moonmilk wall-eye. "Raw."

"Shame to let good meat go to waste," Polder said. He was cook tonight, tending the pot for three of them. It was Gristle's turn to scan the darkness of the cave mouth.

Jadetooth was mostly watching the theater within his head, it seemed. He ignored them both, choosing instead to speak to the fire. "Be walkin' east erst he could 'member."

Polder tapped in a little of their precious salt. "He ever get there? I figure direction is all in where you're standing."

"Man can walk thirty miles a day," said Gristle. "Twenty thousand days in a man's life, that's, uh, thirty thousand miles."

In went the radishes they'd found almost a week back growing by a hot spring. "Six hundred thousand miles, actually. But who's counting?"

"North." Jadetooth stared in the fire some more. "North."

"Ain't no north of Real North," Polder said. "Freeze a man's lungs up here if he forgets to cover up good."

"Tole me a story, man did."

"Jadetooth my friend, you've already said more tonight than I've heard you any two weeks running that we've ever trekked together." Polder shaved some hard sausage into the little pot, meat to flavor the old fatty broth. "You going to tell us this story?"

"It were thus."

The first true story

Once upon a day there was a prince glorious born to the Lemon Palace on the high hill over the Great Bay of the Sunward Sea. Life there was easy, bathed in warmth with plentiful springs bringing sweet water to rich and poor alike. A fleet of wise-eyed boats bobbed bright of the mornings into the Great Bay to tug out the silver swarming fish. The prince glorious woke each day and walked the low, peaceful walls of his father's palace eating a tangerine and calling down blessings to those who worked the waves far below his feet.

Like all young men he grew uneasy with his fate, imagining his parents to be pinchpennies and bereft of vision or purpose. He knew that others elsewhere had their lot in life better than him. Not more comfortable, perhaps -- he was not stupid, the prince glorious -- but more interesting than the never-ending sameness of sunrise and sunset and fresh fruit and fine fish and doe-eyed serving girls vying for the places with him in his bath.

And so he set out, clothed in silk and dignity and the armor of assurance that all youth carry. He turned his back on the Lemon Palace, on the Great Bay of the Sunward Sea, on the fish and birds and women that had made his youth so easy and pleasurable. He did not even think to take a blade with him, for no one on the shores of the Great Bay had ever spat on his shadow or called him spawn of a tyrant or sought to cut his purse or take his fig. Truly, he had no sense of what the world might be.

He walked the shadowed trade road, passing out of his father's realm and into the world beyond, where clouds lay low and fat-bellied across drowned farmland. There desperate men with rusty knives prowled the dusk while women carried in their sweetpockets the burning itch and firepiss. Mile by mile, day by day, cut by cut, failure by failure, he learned the folly of his longings. But when the day came that sense trumped pride, he could not find the way home.

The second true story

Once I was a dandy, moving rocks to make room for goats

Once I was so handy, moving goats to make room for rocks

Once I wooed a maiden bedded, made her sheets so red

Once I slept in bloodied sheets atop a maiden's head

Once I carried a sword, fighting some old man's war

Once I marched to war, carrying a young man's sword

Once I walked a wall, limping in the cold

Once I limped on paths of stones, slowly growing old
Once I passed a gate, turned my face toward the north
Once I found the gate behind me, I found Real North

The third true story

My sweetest mayor of the palace --

May these words find you with the sweetness of honey, the thrill of larks, and the speed of light upon the water. My eunuch tells me I am granted the privilege of one final missive prior to the defenestration. I have chosen to cast my poor words, along with my miserable life, upon the glorious mercy of your eyes.

It is my greatest and final sorrow to have so troubled His Sublimity with my meager studies. It was ever and only my intention to advance the state of human knowledge within our fair city, to our best advantage in commerce and affairs of the sword alike. To truly comprehend the shape of the world would be a boon to the masters of our trading fleets, and to the captains of our war galleys. Even such mysteries as the progress of weather might yield to potential certainties of topology.

Yet I know my measurements and reasoning have brought pain to our most enlightened leader, and greatly troubled the Sublime Court as well. And so I say this, sworn by these teeth torn from my mouth by my own hands: give me leave only to burn my notes and cast my models into the sea, and I shall ever after speak the truth which has been so evident to all not blinded by the folly of scholarship: the world is round as the dreaming mind of God, and ever it shall be.

Yours in the flame and the fire,

(signed)

Azzaroti of House Perdi, condemned apostate by the grace of His Sublimity

In the beginning

Each of these men is a figment of the others' imagination. No two of them are real. No one of them is false. Real North has burned the stories from them. Real North marks the edge of human. Real North has left them only with their true selves.