

Author's note:

As a child I was fascinated by the old Ace Doubles, which consisted of two short novels, printed back-to-back. I wondered if two novels could be mirror images of each other, without losing reader interest. When, as an adult, it occurred to me that *evil* and *life* are mirror images, my wonder grew. "The Mirror of Lop Nor" (Ultimate Unicorn, HarperPrism, 1997) was my attempt to satisfy that childhood interest. It was a finalist for the Nebula, the Oscar of science fiction and fantasy. Like a lot of fiction up for that award, it is literary fiction.

The excerpt is the beginning of the second half of the novelette. The material in italics refers to the first half, which took place in twelfth century Mongolia and western China. It involves a Chinese man who is one of the famed messenger riders for the Mongols; whenever he is away, his wife is raped by his Mongol commander. The young man dies at the end of the novelette and tries to will himself into lake so he might join his wife after death. The second half, as you will see, is set in Greenland in the late twentieth century. The three principals are back, though involved in a different form of rape.

Lop Nor is a real lake. It was the subject of a rather ugly debate among nineteenth century explorers for dramatically shifting location. It later was discovered that the winds are so fierce in the region that they scallop the lake edges and it constantly moves.

The Mirror of Lop Nor

--Refraction--

I am amid narwhals' whistles and terrified wheezes, like elders coughing; flukes slapping, kayak creaking, ice converging as froth and fear pull me into waves in whose tangled hair sea mammals breed and bear: the world's watery roots.

I do not fight the drowning. It troubles me no more than the failure of the research project. Without sorrow or solace I remember how, before the narwhals collapsed the kayak, this sea and my soul were calm as a mirror, the narwhals mirrors of the world's fragility, their flanks a map of time.

My eyes and lungs bulge, saltwater and bile burst into my mouth, bubbles escape as if seeking a higher lifeform to inhabit. I am oddly at peace despite the pain, as though, like water bending light, the fjord refracts my past. As sea and ice give way to darkness, I imagine the kayak's skirt hugging my waist, thinking *there is no life without winter*. Moon the color of snow, glaciers lying like

predators along the fjord. Whalesong – and spray from the narwhals' spouting. Do only we Eskimos see the value of the white world? Jerac was right: women should hold the animal's legs while their husbands skin. He was wrong about everything else. As I was, about everything.

I imagine myself again paddling in the polynia, the narwhals in a rosette around me, flukes toward the kayak, tusks outward. I barely dip the paddles, awed by what might drive whales to such a geometric. Display of communal well-being, or does an enemy lurk? Will an orca surface or polar bear pad out from among icefall? I lift my paddle in an absurd attempt at defending myself.

I sigh at my naiveté, put down the paddle; the whalesong is not one of fear. I let the kayak drift as I admire the tusks. Slender and spiraled, brittle and exquisite. Small wonder why Medieval Europeans used them as scepters and believed them imbued with Grace: capable of curing impotency or ague, able to detect and neutralize poison. Symbols of imperial power, they brought a king's ransom.

Today, for as little as three thousand krøner, you can hang one in your den; for only fools believe in unicorns. The educated pontificate about rhinos being the basis of the myth, while the real unicorns go on dying – harvested for horns, or their tusks caught in cod and salmon nets.

The wind comes up as if to chill my anger, reminding me that the world of ice-pack and ice-cap, though filled with retribution, is without remorse. The living cannot retrieve the dead.

I am chilled despite my polypropylene, sweater, down coat, anorak. My perspiration has begun to freeze. As usual I am overdressed--as I was at Copenhagen's Polytekniske except for my freshman year. After Jerac left school, I discarded my jeans for skirts and pressed slacks. I became the Eskimo who had discarded her culture. Jerac and the Arctic taught me nothing, nothing; but I learned less at the university. Heat, not cold, kills earliest on the ice; I know that much. It is opposite in academe.

Maybe as a grad student I should have attempted to radio-tag Jerac instead of narwhals. Perhaps I could have kept track of him. And he, me.

We met at Polytekniste as freshmen, both never out of Greenland before. Right off the ice, as they say. He was gorgeous: skin like moist terra cotta, physique that brought him the gold in the knuckle-hop at the Eskimo Olympics, eyes so dark our heritage could not account for their depth. "A magician in bed," my dormmates told me. "Makes your inhibitions disappear."

We became lovers back home the following summer, while working at the cannery in Godthåb. Rather, he worked--on the slime line sixteen hours a day--and I was paid for delivering coffee and bad jokes. "Happy slimers are safe slimers," I had convinced the corporation, proving to myself, and any worker I could browbeat into listening, that the fishing industry's executives had the brains of beat-up humpies seeking to spawn.

Perhaps if he were not always giving up precious sleep to sleep with me, our weekend on the tundra would have gone differently. Jerac packed the basics, I brought my usual: Walkman with mini-speakers, freeze-dried kung pao chicken, leather flask filled with chablis. And mushrooms, this time.

An experimenter back then, I was anxious to try some, but only if Jerac joined me. At first he shook his head. I delayed asking again until after we made love to exhaustion--my exhaustion, anyway--in that endless light while the summer wind sighed against our tent. At last he lay with his head on my belly as we talked and snacked on pickled mangtuk. "About the mushrooms," I asked again, and he became silent; lay looking at the ceiling.

"They say that's what caused her problem," he said bitterly.

"I thought you said she'd eaten too much stink flipper. Or was drunk."

"She *couldn't* have been drunk."

His face hardened, but it was I who was annoyed – he invoking *her* again. For someone who never existed, the woman from Qingmiuneqarfik often came between us. For Jerac she existed.

He took the last piece of whaleskin from his mouth, replaced it in the Tupperware. He had temporarily lost his taste for its flavor of hazelnut and cloves. "Only if we do it the old way," he said.

"God, Jerac."

I was not so town-Eskimo that I did not know the tradition. The woman injected the mushrooms, her liver filtering out toxins but not the hallucinogens. The man drank her urine.

It was crazy. It was also *culture*.

I hesitated. I realized there were boundaries to what I'd try. That, more than the danger and attendant humiliation, gave me pause. I felt old. But not like Eskimos are supposed to feel old.

"Never mind," he said. After a moment he added, in an awkward attempt at levity, "If the sexism bothers you we could switch roles."

I laughed, but it was forced, reluctant. I sighed, lay down alongside him, head to toe. I gathered my courage and foolishness. "Would you fill a cup, or would I have to drink from the faucet?"

"You're certain."

I wavered: finally shut my eyes.

"It's too gross."

I waited to be caressed and cajoled. But Jerac misunderstood; silence filled the tent. He slowly sat up, put the film canister containing the mushrooms back into the side pouch of my pack, and crawled from the tent. Head, shoulders, bare butt, bare feet, gone.

"God, Jerac," I said, to the ceiling.

There were tears in my eyes.

I wouldn't cry, I never cried. Not for a man, anyway. When my father died I was stone. Stone when my brothers and uncle died. As the boys in my high school at Godthåb dropped like dominoes – a suicide and accident, accident and suicide; and how do you classify Russian roulette? – I had stonehood polished to perfection. The gleam in my eyes at graveside reflected my heart. It was not caused by tears.

I refused to follow Jerac outside. I crossed my arms as though to keep my will in place, and tightly shut my eyes.

Sleep slowly enveloped me. Not exactly sleep, but not daydreaming. I lay in the stupor of considerable sex and too little empathy. For the first time I could recall, I dreamed of deserts.

He lies on the ground while sand skirls in the wind, his tattered jacket and puffy pants billowing, the goatskin boots full of holes, his toes and hands and face shriveled to parchment. The lips are gnarled, eye sockets empty. Sand builds along the windward side of his legs, spreads over the knees and thighs, angles across the jacket. Only the feet and face remain uncovered. When the wind abates, a bird lands on his chest, and after walking around as though nervously testing the stability beneath its feet, tears off the upper lip as if pulling up a worm. The bird flies toward a lake lying on the horizon like a shiny coin. The ravage has unhinged the jaw; it sags open. The man appears to be desperately grinning. Dusk brings the wind. Shadows and sand fill the mouth.

When I awakened I felt a sense of loss, whether only from Jerac's absence I wasn't sure. I pulled on my things and crawled outside.

As if unmindful of the chill, he lay naked and seemingly asleep on the lichen-covered slope beyond the tundra marsh. I slogged over, padded up the hill, nudged his foot with my boot.

"Good way to get hypothermia."

He turned his face toward the ice-cap along the horizon. The moon was silver-blue, the sun pale and distant. My watch buzzed. *Midnight.*

"You going too play *shrug?*" I demanded.

He would sometimes go silent and rigid, in the way Eskimo men often do, infuriating everyone with their silent fury, communication reduced to slight shoulder movements.

He shrugged.

I returned to the tent, lay remembering the discussions my girlfriends and I sometimes had. Many Eskimo men were dysfunctional. Was it wise to marry or have children by one? But there were voices that blew down from the ice-cap, whispering *for the good of the culture.*

He returned an hour later. We shared the tent, but we might as well have slept on opposite sides of Greenland, the ice-cap between us.

The wind lulled my anger away.

The man staggers against sand blowing across the desert, his cheeks so puffy with sunburn that his eyes are slits. A lake seems to shine in the sky, winking as he stumbles. He passes a swollen tongue across his lips. "Bragda," he utters, and collapses to his knees.

He crawls on, hands turned in, shoulders bowed like those of a lizard. Then his elbows give way; abruptly, his face is on the ground. When he lifts his face, sand covers his left eye, clinging to the mucous. He brushes desperately, again collapses. "Bragda." He clutches at sand.

I awoke to an ATV stuttering across the tundra. Outside, I found Jerac watching as the machine pitched and yawed across the niggerheads. His eyes were hard and narrow.

Jailspur was at the throttle, face burnished by the midnight sun. He shut off the machine and slapped his gloves down among the gas cans strapped to the rear luggage rack.

"Brought you something," he told Jerac.

He grinned, held up a baggie filled with fish strips. He was unshaven, his teeth green with grime, a front one missing.

"You came ten miles to bring smoked sheefish," I said suspiciously.

"Breakfast ready?" he asked Jerac.

Icily: "Tea and pilot bread."

"Sounds fine to me."

We ate sitting on rocks, not speaking. The slabs of snow and ice that dotted the summer camp seemed appropriate. Jerac stared at the bag of fish strips, holding it by the ends as if it were evidence. He ate nothing.

"You have the papers," he said finally, not looking at the older man.

Jailspur took a folded sheaf from his jacket and held it toward Jerac, arms' length, between forefinger and thumb. Jerac looked at the papers as if appraising their weight, the way he looked at the bar during gymnastic meets. He lowered his eyes and reached for the papers.

Jailspur pulled them back, Jerac's fingers closing on air.

The Dane laughed. Jerac seized the papers, held them before Jailspur's face as though to slap him with them, then walked to the edge of camp, where he clutched the papers against his stomach and stood looking across the tundra. A fulmar circled, screeching, angry at having humans near her nest. Jerac did not look up.

The papers, I was sure, were his long-awaited boat title and commercial permit. He could now sell fish on the open market. But Jailspur's unsubtle choreography with the fingers was not lost on me. Prohibitively expensive in our world of limited-entry cod and salmon openings, the papers had come at a price beyond the percentage of profits Jerac would owe his benefactor.

When Jerac was a boy, Jailspur briefly was his foster parent – until the courts decided Jailspur was not fit to be anyone's parent.

The Dane was back in Jerac's life.

Jailspur zippered his jacket, put on his gloves, slipped a leg over the machine with the exaggerated extension of someone mounting a Harley, yanked the starter cord. The ancient Honda roared into life.

I pulled the key from the ignition, the tundra again still except for the fulmar's cawing. "This could have waited," I told him. "He hasn't finished school. Tend to your fucking boat yourself. Leave him alone."

He held out his hand for the key, his body language insolent. I cocked my arm, ready to throw the key out into the tundra muck.

"Go back to Copenhagen – Bunnuq," he said, using my Eskimo name.

"Jerac goes with me," I answered.

"He knows where he's from. That's where he belongs."

Jerac had grown up in Qingmiuneqarik--the village in which, it was said, a woman mated with dogs and produced the white race, nearly human outside but monstrous within. Only non-Eskimos would fail to understand such shame. Jerac's accomplishments paled by comparison.

"They should have locked you up," I said. "Jerac told me what you did."

Jailspur looked up at me from the tops of his sockets, brows pulled down.

"Never did nothing. The court said so. So did Jerac."

"Not anything anyone could prove. Or would testify to."

He smiled. It was haunting, and I sensed it would go with me when I returned to the university, even if Jerac did not.

I pitched the key as far as I could.

His face reddened even more. I thought he would hit me. I had been in a few fights, growing up in Godthåb, but they were mostly scratch-and-hair affairs, few fists. I never had been punched by a man. I wasn't ready, but in a way I wished it would happen.

Instead he sneered, reached into his rubber coveralls, withdrew a wallet, took out another key. He started the machine. "Jerac's a big boy."

He roared away, spewing mud and exhaust. The machine listed like a dog raising a leg as he traversed the nearest niggerhead. He raised a middle finger.

I looked for a rock or stick, but ended up throwing insults.

"He's not a boy! And he never was *your* boy!"

The finger remained up like a flag. I strode toward Jerac, thinking that perhaps I *had* eaten mushrooms, that the world was unreal. I wanted him to do *something* – tear up the papers, tear off Jailspur's finger.

His back to me, he was looking at the sun, red and diamond-shaped. "Only a share of the profits," he said. "That's all he'll want."

I looked around his shoulder--withdrew to keep from embarrassing him and having him walk away from me again. His eyes were so moist I half expected a tear to form upon his lashes. I put my cheek against his shoulder blade. "That's all he'll want," he said. He was quivering.

"You needn't accept what he's offering."

His body shook convulsively. "Even if I get a degree – how long before I raise enough cash for another chance like this?"

"You can always subsistence-fish."

"And my children?"

"You don't have children."

"But I will! And they will!"

He was talking crazy.

"You're sounding like a white man--always worried about the future."

"What am I, but a white man!--*masquerading*. What am I, anymore."

He walked away, and I couldn't have gone to him even had he wanted me to.

What were we – any of us – all of us.

When he returned to the tent, his reticence was more profound than before – he did not even shrug when I spoke to him. I ran my tongue along the length of his palm; he did not respond. Finally I eased his sweatpants down.

He was the only man I'd slept with who hated having orgasms. In bed he had an obsessive desire to please. I think Jailspur had taught him too well.

When he came, he gripped my hair.

"Leah," he said. "Leah."

It was my Christian name, and he hated it.

When I slept, the warmth and salt of him still in my mouth, I was again transported from the tundra to a hotter and far more foreign desert.

The man faces the wind, cheek crusted with sand, eyes and lips tight, arms out. His hands are fisted. Between him and the lake, amid the furling sand, rears a muscular reddish unicorn, forelegs kicking, its tusk translucent as an icicle. The man rocks as though inebriated and sits down in the sand, shoulders slumped, arms sagged, hands listless in his lap. "Everything I had," he mutters. "You ruined it all."

His eyes close as of their own accord. Sand peppers his face, but he seems not to notice. "If I get back to Mongolia . . . I'll kill you with my bare hands."

Back at the cannery, Jerac took to wearing mirror-like sunglasses, a baseball cap on backwards, jeans with holes in the knees; things he'd seen on TV. He no longer laughed at my jokes or invented horrible similes to describe my coffee, and everyone on the line was faster with a fillet knife. We slept separately. When we were together we ate salmon instead of anything special, and didn't talk much.

We flew back to Copenhagen, but he stayed less than a quarter. He skipped practices, and his grades slipped. None of my girlfriends asked about him anymore.

The night he left for Greenland, the Berlin Wall was officially coming down. Everyone who was anyone flocked to Germany, as though some Teutonic migration had begun. The flight to Reykjavik, where he'd change planes, was nearly empty. "I'll stay if you beg me," he said. "I'll do anything you want if you beg me."

I reached to remove his sunglasses before he kissed me, but he backed away, hands up defensively, then compounded the slight by bowing and attempting to kiss my hand like some stupid European.

That night, Woman Without Face came to me for the first time.

The man staggers into the wind, snow, not sand, billowing around him. "Kill you," he mutters. At the edge of the lake in the distance stands a figure in a thick hooded coat, spear raised. The figure motions him forward. As he stumbles closer, he sees that the beckoning hand is the color of mourning. White as a fish's belly. He squints against the sun, trying to discern the figure's face, but except for a curve of slitted wood where the eyes should have been, the face is lost in the hood's darkness.

The figure points toward the lake--rimmed and chocked with huge ice chunks that float in a surface that mirrors the sun. Great fish-like creatures break the surface, noisily spouting, their geysers forming rainbows.

Jerac's promised letter-a-month became postcard-a-season, then ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN. The next summer I remained in Denmark, on a work-study stint that, appropriately, considering the omnipresence of Hans Christian Anderson, had me counting swans. That the other researchers called me Ugly Duckling did not stop several married ones from asking me out. I slept alone, and badly, and studied so much that I found myself with a galloping GPA I ultimately rode into grad school.

My proposed dissertation, *Echolocation: Acoustical Analogues in the Narwhal (Monodon monoceros)*, was my undoing. The day my committee approved the topic I stood amid tanks that reeked of formaldehyde, and in concert before a hundred watchful specimens remembered with trembling clarity my last afternoon with Jerac, beneath the down comforter in my dorm room. The moment just prior to climax, I had told myself *he's only another partner only a partner* until I accidentally willed my orgasm away.

"You all right?" my committee head asked as she scrawled her signature.

Momentarily speechless, I pointed to the title, which I realized I had unintentionally typed in boldface. The subtext implied I would be returning to Greenland, for research. Straining against the weakness the memory instilled, I said, "I'll need money."

She stifled a smile at my non-sequitor and glanced at her colleagues.

"Of course you do. All grad students do. Goes with the territory."

"What you're really here to learn," the second smiled at his own incisive humor, "is how to live with being poor. Then we watch you jump through research hoops."

The third, balding except for gray around his ego, had spent much of his research the past year trying to determine how to get into my pants. "You're *Eskimo*," he said. "Apply for Northern Studies Institute funding. Americans love to throw money at anything *Native*. They think it assuages some collective guilt."

My non-sequitors. My youthful enthusiasm. My culture. Ultima Thule, the world they called Grønland. Such were the amusements in the mausoleum of higher education.