

Freydis Erik's-daughter
&
the Vinland Venture

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Cover and book design by Marianne Swan

for

Marianne

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by a Guggenheim Fellowship in film-writing, supported by film critic and essayist Nora Sayre (1932-2001), which allowed me to travel to Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland, to visit museums and talk to scholars. I am also grateful to Gudmundur Pall Olafsson, Iceland's foremost nature writer and conservationist until his death in 2012, whom I met in the course of my travels and whose research into the natural life and history of a northern land proved invaluable in imagining the life and times of Freydis Erik's-daughter. My guides to life in medieval Greenland and to the various voyages to Vinland were Birgitta Linderöth Wallace, author of *The Norse in Newfoundland: L'Anse aux Meadows and Vinland* and *The Viking Settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows*, among other groundbreaking studies, and Kirsten A. Seaver, author of *The Frozen Echo: Greenland and the Exploration of North America* and *The Last Vikings: The Epic Story of the Great Norse Voyagers*. I am grateful, too, to the late Fred Jordan, formerly editor-in-chief of Grove Press and, later, of Pantheon, who, as editor at Fromm International, which did not publish fiction, said that reading my manuscript – a novel at the time – made him “feel alive” and gallantly forwarded the manuscript, with its copious nonfictional end notes, to the publisher. I was also encouraged by the response from British poet Andy Croft, publisher of Smokestack Press, which specializes in radical and unconventional poetry. “It is an ambitious and original idea and a fascinating project,” he wrote. “The problem is that I don’t think I could do justice to it. This book deserves a bigger publisher than Smokestack.”

Finally, I acknowledge my indebtedness to William Carlos Williams, whose essay “Red Eric,” in *In the American Grain*, introduced me to Freydis more than fifty years ago. In that essay, Williams sees Erik the Red as a man who, exiled from Iceland on murder charges, re-invents himself as a respected leader through his discovery and settlement of the land he calls Greenland, and thus very much in the American grain. Freydis's story – which can be read as a Viking-age parable of envy and greed tied to a tale of man-shaming courage – may seem more timely.

Unn's Daughter

The woman rising up from the past in the moss-green tunic dress
slowly comes into focus red hair green eyes striding manfully
you are tempted to say as she vanishes into your forehead

Freydis sired by Erik the Red on a slave Irish like so many
taken in those days by raiders and sold in the market
at Trondheim or Dublin traffic in women being as common

then as now And Erik bought her and brought her to the land
he had explored during his three years of exile for having killed
a couple of men and which he named Greenland because

he said 'people would be much more tempted to settle there if
it had an attractive name' And settlers were drawn to the country
whose name was not altogether a lie for the mouths of the fjords

yawned wide to reveal green slopes rising on either side and rivers
flashing with salmon trout and char So the settlers 'especially
those vikings living on poor land in Iceland' and others fleeing

from feuds that consumed fathers and sons packed up family
and kinsmen cattle and chattel and set sail And Erik granted them
vast tracts of land and the fjords were named after the first settlers

thus Erik's Fjord and Einar's Fjord Ketil's Fjord and so on And
Erik expelled from the one country became leader of another Godi
was his title chieftain priest chief priest of Thor whose nickname

was Red Beard after the color of the lightning bolt just as Erik's
was the Red after the color of his hair And Freydis' namesake
goddess was said to be Freya goddess of love and fertility

of both birth and war who flew as a falcon to the underworld
and rode to battle in a chariot drawn by two cats Freya the fair
who survives to this day transformed into a hag on a stick

a Halloween witch with a black cat on the back of her broom
the old gods whisked away by the new leaving only this mist
out of which a woman rises up wearing a moss-green tunic dress

Freydis the slave-born daughter of Erik whose wife moved out
when Erik refused to renounce Thor and accept Christ whose priest
Erik's son Leif had brought back from Norway at the command

of the converted king dividing the family The wife moves out The sons
remain And into the household Erik brings Freydis not yet a woman
her cropped hair grown out to glow red against the green A horseman

sweeps her up before she can weep and brings her down to the manor house
in front of which the three sons stand She stands alone on the cold flagstones
the chill creeping through the thin soles of shoes made of tanned hides

Leif the eldest is the first to speak in a sideways voice to his brothers
'Our mother moves out and this it seems we must accept in exchange'
Thorvald the second-born stares shakes his head and says nothing

Then Thorstein a boy of Freydis' age steps forward placing hands on hips
And 'Lift your head Mouse' he says 'so I can see your face' She lifts
her head He clears his throat and in a high-pitched voice recites these lines

*Glower and glare
Green eyes and red hair
The lout who gets you
won't count himself lucky*

The Acknowledgment

What can we know of the life of a girl or woman who lived
a thousand or more years ago a generation before Macbeth
and his lady when Freya still flew as a falcon and Thor still

proved his power in thunder and lightning but was forced
now to yield ground to a guardian angel named Michael
an import from abroad from lands where people and places

had unheard-of names? Thus Michael Jonah and Jerusalem
The saga accounts only tell us that Freydis was slave-born
illegitimate and unwelcome in her father's house where Erik

takes his place in the high seat whose stout pillars are carved
from base to top to show forth a branching tree on whose boughs
birds with bulging painted eyes and scale-like plumage perch

and glare while Freydis takes her place among the women who
will have seen her turning hay with her mother or milking ewes
and wearing a tunic the color of mud her hair cropped like that

of all who labor in field and pen and barn where at midnight
on a midsummer day a man might lead a woman and beget
another slave as Erik had begotten Freydis She takes her place

among the women and dozes off as the bard with the egg-white eye
recites a lay about Thor in a boat struggling to haul up a serpent

*who thrashed the whale's acre writhed in wrath striving to be free
of the barb buried deep in his mouth-roof to plunge under
to rise again when the Cock shall crow and the Wolf swallow the Sun*

On the last day of the feasting Arnora the hunchback touches
her shoulder takes a lamp from a niche and leads the girl into
a storeroom warmed by the stacks of breathing fleeces There

she parts Freydis' hair into strands and the braids into a circlet
which she pins in place with a golden pin then leads her out
of the fleece room and 'Hold your head high' she says And

Freydis makes her way between the indrawn knees of the men
on the benches to the edge of the dais Her father lifts her lightly
takes her onto his lap turns her to face out into the hall holding

her closely against his breathing chest 'This is my daughter Freydis'
he says 'I hereby acknowledge her as my daughter in token whereof...'
He draws from his belt pouch a silver chain from which hangs

an amulet It shows her namesake goddess standing upright
reins in hand in a full-moon-wheeled cart drawn by two cats
He drops the chain over her head and calls for ale

The horn with the silver rim is filled 'To the health of Freydis
Erik's daughter!' he bawls out The men roar back the words
The women exchange a glance then ply their needles as before

The Marriage Contract

Again as before the acknowledgment Arnora parts and plaits
Freydis' hair and twists the plaits into a circlet held in place
with a golden pin the girl's face set in a glower while her suitor

waits in the great hall Arni Einarsson nicknamed the Norway
Trader because each year or every other depending on the weather
he sails his *Sea Ox* to Trondheim to trade bolts of homespun

and walrus hide that cut in strips makes stout cable and also
the whorled horns of the gray narwhal brought down from the north
where the white falcons prized by kings are trapped or stolen

from the nest as fledglings at the cost of an eye in exchange for
timber and grain axes and adzes rivets and nails and silk
as well as kegs crates and casks of malt and hops to be offered

for sale on the marketplace plain on Erik's Fjord Freydis' mouth
has gone dry waiting for her father to call her name He calls
her name She steps out of the shadows Erik looks closely at her

then at Einar the suitor's father whose tufted eyebrows rise
surprised by the sight of Freydis so dressed and groomed And
his slow son Arni in turn opens his mouth and drops his jaw

and struggles to rise when Erik tells Freydis to sit by her suitor
And why? Why this man? Balding stocky bellied with a nose
as wide-nostriled as a snout She tries not to stare at it and looks

instead at his belt which like hers is silver-studded They gaze at each other's belts They sit They stare off at the fathers who done talking shake hands as if something has been agreed upon

Then Einar and Arni take their leave returning three days before the Yule festival at which time Einar recites the marriage contract in the presence of witnesses among them Erik's surly crony

from the days of exile and exploration Thorhall is his name but he's called the Hunter a nickname won in those lean years when with spear and bow he kept the exiled family fed At his side

stand Gunnar of Long Eye and son Olaf nicknamed the White for the streak left in his hair when the fire-spitting lightning ball chased him up the slope and singed his shoes By Olaf stands

the groom's uncle Hjalti his face blotched by a purple birthmark Then there's Orm the horse-faced kinsman who sails with Arni to far markets and on land serves as Einar's bailiff These are the five

who nod as Einar recites the terms of the marriage contract after stating that in light of the age of the bride-to-be the wedding will be put off until Arni returns from Norway at summer's end If the waves

should claim him Freydis Erik's-daughter shall retain the dowry and be free to marry another Further she is to be in charge of the estate as soon as husband and wife share the same bed And entitled to half

of the estate no matter how long or short the marriage may last Einar's voice has gone hoarse And Freydis has fallen into a kind of listening slumber in which she beholds Arni He is opening their bed-closet door

Here's where we'll live he says She steps inside He shuts the door