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WWW.ORIGAMIPOEMS.COM
origami poems@gmail.com


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EGIL
Variations on a Saga
Nancy Jasper © 2014
Random Acts of Poetry



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EGIL
Variations on a Saga



Nancy Jasper

Egil's Mouth

He is intimate
and specific,
wants us to know
his mouth
from the inside,
before
words come,
when the throat
is stunned,
when the tongue
labors.
Earlier,
after violence,
he had improvised
a poem
about how his mouth
could bite.
This is different.

Egil Is Baffled By Grief

For Egil,
revenge
was the final stage of grief.
When his son
drowned,
he didn't know who to hurt.
He couldn't hurt the sea.
Odin
was beyond his reach.
So he stopped,
he simply
stopped.
His daughter
had to tell him
there was a poem
caught
in his throat.

Bear

A bear has wandered into Egil's story.
It is not an avatar of Odin,
although Odin can be called Bear.
It is not the pelt of a berserker,
although it is true that Egil is angry.
No,
the bear seems to have come from a fairy tale
to frighten children.
The children are guarding sheep
and they tell Egil about the bear.
He is hiding in the woods.
They have been told to watch out for him.
They think Egil must not be very clever,
because he has not heard about the bear.
Egil is delighted by this.
He will use it in a ruse.
He has come for a child.
Not these children,
he will be friendly with them,
but for the king's son.
The king's son is ten years old.
He is sleeping.
Not even at the edges of his dream
does he hear the branches moving.

Egil Swims Away From Europe

Those were the days
in which Harold Fairhair
locked up Norway,
consolidated his hegemony,
combed down cowlicks.
Egil was unmanageable,
he was always starting up.
He could escape from anything.
He was a regular Houdini.
Once, his enemies tied him up,
left him to stew all night
over what they would do to him in the morning.
His large head schemed.
He threw the knots
into other-dimensioned space
until they loosened.
He escaped,
burned down the house.

Egil

Not all poets are sensitive and solitary.
Consider Egil Skallagrimsson,
Icelandic, tenth century.
The old sociopath was known
for the disproportions of his violence,
the strategic
deployment of his kennings,
his capacity for lament.
When necessary,
he could turn himself into metaphors.
A good poem
almost saved his life.
He stayed up all night,
made a better poem.
His enemy, the queen,
sat on a branch outside his window.
Her birdy,
judicious ear
caught
the technical innovation,
the Continental end rhymes,
and the praise,
and she knew her husband would fall for it.

Egil got tired of Europe.
He was an independent man.
He preferred the integrity of revenge
to law or social usage.
He dived into the water,
swam
until he heard the basaltic muttering,
the tectonic plates
where Europe bumps up against North America.