

I first met the skinless woman at the height of The Dream Summer, that decade-long period of supernatural global warming where the world got hot and sticky, and the barriers between mind and matter broke down so as to become indistinguishable. Ten years of madness manifesting physically. The collective psychoses of our age and our individual paranoid in solid, terrifying form.

At first it was those fears we all shared on the surface: nuclear bombs went off in the major cities, though no bombs had been dropped; floors vanished from inside skyscrapers, and people fell hundreds of feet to their deaths—the piles of bodies got so large that many on the top floors survived, cushioned by the corpses of those who'd lived beneath them.

As the world descended deeper into The Dream Summer, the manifestations became increasingly neurotic. Before they stopped entirely, the world's cars roamed the roads with a life of their own, supernaturally powered, with no need for fuel or a driver. Sometimes passive, though more often murderous. Those who needed to travel avoided the roads. Car parks were like tiny colosseums, slick with oil and stinking of mechanical violence.

Many of our long dormant mythologies then revived themselves—our oldest primal nightmares as decade-long daydreams. People were mauled in the forests by wolves that had been extinct for centuries, and vampires ruled the night. Yetis ruled the mountains, and there were tales of giants roaming the moors.

The mythologies of our technological age were no less solid. UFOs were sighted by millions each night; millions more gave birth to mutant children, with second heads or sets of wings like dragonflies'. Many gave birth to beautiful, transparent crystal children with bodies made of a thin organic glass—though, tragically delicate as they were, they never lasted long.

But my skinless woman—I say 'my' because, though many claimed to have met her, I don't believe any of them met mine—she was too old and arrived too early to be one of the victims of the in-utero genetic corrosion. Even the fastest of The Ageing Children weren't old enough by then.

She may have been a result of The Dream Summer, a hallucinated pagan paranoia made flesh by cosmic rays or collective psychic manifestation, but maybe not—surely something real once had to exist to inspire the legends that we manifested over that long, hot decade.

I have always lived in solitude. The nearest small town is an hour's drive—or a few hours' walk—away. Hills rise up on three sides around my domicile, and not far from my front door is a cliff which drops straight into the ocean. No civilisation can be seen from my cottage, and my cottage cannot be seen from civilisation. I leave my doors unlocked.

One night, four years into that endless summer, I was shocked awake by the slamming of a door downstairs. My heart pounding, I grabbed my shotgun out from under my bed, loaded it, and stood aiming it at my closed bedroom door.

I was not so stupid as to directly confront an intruder during The Dream Summer. I don't know if enough people believed in Lindworms or Wights to have manifested them into reality that early on, but my knowledge of them, and fear that someone else might manifest them, might have been enough. Even now, we still know next to nothing about the mechanics of those sweaty, psychedelic years.

Some ancient ethnic memory, something in our blood, still feared the impossible and terrible things feared by our ancestors a millennia ago, and those not-quite-forgotten akashic fears eventually called all our long-forgotten cryptids forth into life once again.

Nobody would claim our societies retained extensive knowledge of the old folklores. But, nonetheless, Nuckleavees rampaged through small Scottish towns, killing hundreds; and ghostly Black Dogs became a constant nuisance in rural areas across the British Isles. When the cars finally all stopped dead—neither usable nor dangerous, merely inert—people once again had to walk from place to place, and, on roadsides, we saw the return of those old unlegged traveller tricksters: the Skiapodes.

I stood, armed and waiting, listening to someone fumbling through my kitchen. Glass shattering. Cupboards and drawers slamming. A racket, but an intelligent racket. And then there was silence. Followed shortly by what sounded, though muffled and distant, like the sound of a woman weeping. Curiosity, and no small amount of chivalry, got the better of me.

Downstairs, illuminated in the 3AM moon's blacklight glow, a red woman was sitting at my kitchen table.

She was totally naked, stripped even of her skin; a wet woman of sinew, muscle, and cartilage, patterned with an ornate spiderweb of blue blood vessels, like scars from a lightning strike. And, as she wiped tears from her face, she hissed through her teeth in agony—the saltwater like acid on her unprotected nerve-endings.

She looked up at me, pathetic, and gestured to my ruined kitchen, "I'm sorry, I want some tea," then returned to weeping.

I didn't know what else to do. I cracked my shotgun, hung it over my shoulder, and made tea.

Without lips, it was difficult for the skinless woman to drink.

She would put the ceramic mug up to her mouth and bite down—the bone and ceramic making an awful clicking sound as she trembled—then she'd try to suck what she could through her teeth—dribbling just as much down her chest—before putting the cup back on the table. Between sips, she would let go of the teacup with a wet unsticking sound as her fingers peeled away from bloody, half-coagulated fingerprints.

After watching her struggle this way for a few long minutes, I reasoned that the best option would be to pour individual sips into her cup. She seemed not to object, tilting her head back and pouring each shot of tea down her throat like an ocean bird devouring fish.

I coated her cup in olive oil to stop her fingers sticking, and she thanked me.

We didn't talk much. I tried to exchange names, but she told me she didn't have a name.

Two pots of tea later, our brief encounter was over. The Skinless Woman left.

The next morning a pile of animal skin was rotting on my doorstep. Pallid grey, with patches of coarse white hair, I reasoned it was probably seal skin. A beach nearby is home to an immense colony of the fat little aquanauts. Though still wet with blood and seawater, I took it to be a gift from the skinless woman—it was too coincidental to be some other kind of strangeness—so I collected the shreds, washed them off with my garden hose, and hung them to dry from the clothesline in my garden.

That night I waited outside until the sun came up.

It was a week before she visited me again. The seal skin smelled foul, but only the surface blubber seemed to be rotting, so I scraped the skins down each day and salted them in an attempt to preserve them. I kept the skinless woman's animal hides hung up always, like carnivore bunting, to signal my loyalty to her.

When she arrived I would make tea and sit down opposite her. Her cup was always ready for her, smeared in olive oil, and I refilled it for her sip by sip. No matter how hot the tea was, she didn't seem to mind.

These encounters were meditative, like a modern bastardisation of some old pagan ritual which has long since lost its original meaning and yet somehow still retains a grain of its spiritual value. We barely spoke, but she told me to continue scraping and salting the hides.

This witching-hour tea ritual continued weekly for months.

We became friends, of a sort. The skinless woman didn't speak much, but she would sometimes bring me seashells or the deconstructed skeletons of small animals, and would place them around my house, on tables or shelves, before sitting down to tea. These gifts remain, to this day, in the spots where she placed them. They are as important to the structural integrity of my house as the walls and roof-beams.

With each meeting I fell deeper in love with the skinless woman. Her glistening sinews formed a deep feminine nakedness no other man could ever experience. She was completely revealed to me. Without the obstruction of skin, I could watch the outlines of her organs peristaltic and warping as she drank. Her muscles stretched and contorted with each tiny micromovement; the white tendons at the edges of each major grouping pulled taut, holding it all together. She couldn't smile, but each night before she left she would take my hands in hers, and the muscles stretched across her cheekbones would roll tight while the sinews stretched across her brow would relax, her face taking on the stripped-down aspect of a skinned Madonna. Each time this happened I thought of Saint Bartholomew as a woman.

Eventually, I began waiting outside for the skinless woman. Sat on my doorstep, I relished those few extra minutes watching her arrive; watching her climb over the hill and walk down through the fields toward my home. I wanted to experience her as fully and for as long as possible.

On one warm winter night, she arrived with handfuls of a fatty grey-pink mass, which she rubbed on the pelts before coming inside. Over tea she explained, in her short and sharp way, that this was to soften and preserve the hides, and she would now do this each time she visited until they were ready. I was instructed to wash it off each morning before continuing my routine of scraping and salting. I obeyed, and together, hours apart, the skinless woman and I blood-tanned the hides.

On the night of her final visit, the skinless woman stopped at the threshold to my garden. Just outside the gate, she stood, staring at me.—eyes wild, chest rising and falling with heavy, raspy breaths. Without the emotive framework of skin, it was unclear whether the tight, twisted musculature of her face indicated fear or intense excitement. I stood up.

"There will be trouble" she attempted, lipless.

Before I could ask, the glow of distant torches coming over the Eastern hill alerted me to a party of travellers making their way toward us.

With The Dream Summer reducing the world to a state of medieval mythology, many of our medieval social behaviours had also returned.

The further we got into that wild decade, the more loving husbands abandoned their wives to become highwaymen—bandit gangs of the middle class, robbing the horse-drawn

caravans people had to resort to in a world without cars. With each passing year, more families went feral, becoming sword wielding marauders. Larger families ran wild, besieging small villages and attacking travellers. And, from time to time, smaller, more organised gangs of bandits would attack solitary rural houses; sometimes for wives, sometimes for valuables, sometimes just for the fun of trouble and a place to sleep the night.

It has been speculated on in the years since whether the medieval social pathologies were an organic response to the madness, or if they were themselves just another of The Dream Summer's strange manifestations, but, as with so much relating to that hazy decade, nobody truly knows the answer.

The skinless woman struggled with a word that sounded like "wagon" and turned to face the approaching gang. I ran upstairs and grabbed my weapon, only then figuring out that was what she'd tried to say.

By the time I got back outside, the gang was close enough that I could make out its members. Lit by two equally anachronistic torches—one old, a fueled rag wrapped around a stick and set alight; the other new, a battery powered white LED bulb, concentrated into a spotlight—they were the ragged medieval peasantry of a nearby city.

Within shouting distance they turned the electric torch's beam on me, then on the skinless woman. There was a beat of silence.

"What's wrong with her!" shouted the leader.

The group was slowly edging closer; I noticed the leader had a third arm.

"You don't want to come here! We're sick! It's contagious!" I replied.

The skinless woman screamed a harpy's scream, like two distinct voices wrapping around one another. Caduceus as a sound. The approaching gang stopped dead. When The Skinless Woman stopped screaming, the leader looked shaken, but still gave us his demands.

"Look, we're going to stay the night. We're not going to give you or the woman no trouble, as long as you don't give us no trouble. We were attacked by a huge snake out on the motorway. The M-Roads used to be safe, but they aren't anymore. They've got long snakes on them now. Miles long. Quick as a flash and mean as you like. Don't know whose idea that was. Most of the roadsiders have had to move. We're not bandits, we're just travellers." He moved aside and the man behind him carried forward a boy, bleeding profusely from his chest, his face bruise-purple and swollen like a blister about to burst. "The woman's not sick, or, if she is, she's not a danger to us. You seem fine yourself."

They stepped forward and I raised my gun.

"Do you have weapons?" I demanded.

"Of course we have weapons!"

I kept my gun raised. We stared at one another. The leader had an assortment of kitchen knives hanging from his hips. The oldest man carried a cricket bat.

The skinless woman placed her hand on the barrel of my gun and gently pressed down. I looked at her and she looked at me with an empty, vacant look I will never be able to forget. She was, in that moment, pure flesh mythology. We let the travellers in. They left their weapons outside.

There were four of them in total: the extra limbed leader, the dying boy, a barrel chested older man who had been carrying him—younger in this light than they had seemed

outside—and a quiet middle-aged woman, who seemed to be the boy's mother and the leader's wife.

The travellers looked like the reanimated dead. Like peasants from an old medieval TV drama. The heat, the madness, the complete inability of state structures to maintain control in the face of psychoreality... it had all taken a toll on the big cities. While those of us in rural areas had survived relatively comfortably, urban areas, and the urbanites, had regressed to a kind of post-apocalyptic feudalism.

It was a necessary regression, the myths that manifested in the cities were modern—more nihilistic and more vicious than the revived paganisms of the countryside. Killers who would attack at random and slip back into mirrors; phantom gangs of organ-harvesting orientals; sentient-apartments complexes like industrial venus fly traps, trapping their prey in rooms where the doors could never be opened and the windows could never be smashed.

The cities' breed of chaos was a swirling, bitter conflagration of galvanised steel and poured concrete, infinitely devouring those it couldn't send mad.

By contrast, the more rural you got, the more the chaos took on the appearance of the mythologies and folklores of old, still dangerous, but subject to the old protection spells, tricks, and rituals used by our ancestors for thousands of years; as long as you had enough garlic, enough answers to riddles, enough fire, you were safe enough.

As such, those who could gang up and escape the cities tended to. This was one such gang.

"It doesn't look good for him," I said, indicating to the boy.

The boy's father looked at me expressionless, his face deadened by the horrors of the age. Like an old tribal father, the man's primary worry seemed to be the loss of an able bodied male. Grief was a luxury reserved for easier times. He cradled the dying boy in his two primary arms, stroking the boy's damp hair with his vestigial third.

As the sky was turning from black to mariana-trench blue, the boy died.

The woman began weeping and the father said a prayer over the dead boy's body. The rest of us, including the skinless woman, stood stoic, staring at the bloody corpse with abstract fascination more than horror—in the hours since the gang's arrival, the boy had only become further swollen and discoloured; by his death he was a bloody green-purple extraterrestrial, looking almost comical in human clothing. Rather than a tragedy, he seemed a grotesque curio, like a particularly well-rotted piece of roadkill.

The older man and I went outside. We stuck the old flaming torch into the ground for light and began digging a hole. It hadn't occurred to us to do it before the boy had died.

While we were digging, I looked at the man—the oldest of the group but no older than 65; he had a Pollock of scars on his face and neck that looked to be lashes from a whip... old scars, dating back to long before The Dream Summer—he spoke to me without looking at me.

"I know what yer woman is." He pointed the handle of his shovel at the tanned animal skins hanging from the clothesline, and was now obviously refusing to look at me. "Thos're a dead giveaway."

He returned to digging, and we shoveled dirt in silence for a few minutes.

"Mermaid," he said.

"She says she's older than The Dream Summer," I said.

“Aye, they all do, the ones that can speak. I think they are. Dream Summer's just them coming back. We shut it all out for so long.” The grizzled old man stopped digging. “She's going to use you, you know?”

He was looking me in the eyes, his flame-lit face a map of shadows and crags.

“She's cultivating you, son. She'll tan the hide with yer innards before she goes.”

There was a flash in my periphery, and the unmistakable sound of my shotgun being fired.

“No!” one of us shouted, though I don't remember who, as we climbed out of the hole and ran toward the cottage—a rising cacophony becoming ever clearer as we approached.

Inside, the scene was a vision of hell.

The skinless woman was dripping with blood; a mixture of her own and the dead boy's. Her right shoulder had taken the brunt of a close range shotgun blast and her arm was hanging by a thread. She drunkenly staggered to her feet when she saw me and the last few sinews snapped, dropping her skinless limb to the floor.

The boy's mother was howling and wailing with mad terror.

The boy's distended stomach had been torn into and his viscera spilled out. His bowels and other vital organs had been shredded, and the room was filled with a smell that mixed blood, bile, and feces. A yellowish organ has been removed from deep within him, and looked to have been partially eaten by the skinless woman.

The shotgun, which had been used by the boy's father in a moment of panic had been dropped to the floor after a single use, and the three armed father was now curled in the corner of the room in a state of catatonic shock, arms wrapped around his head.

The old man raised his shovel and started toward The Skinless Woman, “Abomination! Fuckin' foul evil mermaid bitch!”

I dove over to my shotgun, grabbed it, turned, and unloaded the second shell into the old man's back. If he had survived, his back would have had scars to match his face, but The Skinless Woman walked over to the writhing, bloody old man, put a foot hard on his shoulder, reached down, and pulled his head from his body, the skin stretching and then splitting with an indescribable sound. It made me vomit. The boy's mother's howls became even more maniacal.

While on my hands and knees, retching, I felt a hot rain splash across the back of my neck. Everything was suddenly silent. I looked up. The scene took on the aspect of a dream.

The skinless woman had her foot inside the guts of the middle aged woman's lower half; the woman's top half was dangling upside down in her one remaining hand, her skinless fingers hooked under the now exposed ribcage.

The skinless woman looked at me for a moment, and then she went over to the catatonic father, unpeeled him from his foetal position, and smothered him to death against the wall with his wife's torso.

When it was all done, the skinless woman came over, took me by the hand, and led me outside. She closed the door.

Even with the front door closed I could still hear the terrible sounds. Wet shuffling, bones cracking. I don't know how long I stood there, my back to the door, just waiting. I looked at the hand she had taken to lead me outside, she had blooded me with a thumbprint in the centre of my palm; a hunter's stigmata indicating my complicity.

And then she called me inside, using my name for the first and only time. I opened the door and went in.

What was left of the family's bodies had been arranged in an X, their heads all facing toward the middle of the arrangement. Split open and hollow, their skulls had been crushed and cracked, and their brains pulled out and mashed and piled into a single mound of grey-pink mass in the centre of the formation. The spilled brain matter added a cloying amniotic element to the room's already dizzying collection of smells.

"This one," she pointed to the father, "he took my arm. You must help me finish." She bent down and grabbed a wet handful from the brain pile. "Then I can go home."

I would have added my own brains to the pile if she had asked.

Together, as the sky lightened, we tanned the seal hides with the same grey-pink mass that the skinless woman had brought with her each night she had visited. I wondered if it had always been human brain matter, or if this was the first time.

Eventually she seemed satisfied, pulled the dripping seal hides from the line, and began wrapping them around her body. The dead family's brains acted as glue, keeping the wrapped leathers stuck tight to her exposed musculature. She left her face uncovered.

When she was done she looked like nothing else I have ever seen. She should have been repulsive, but, with the sun rising behind her, framing her with a halo against the sea, she was beautiful. The ragged skin like robes, her face a vision of placidity. She held both my hands like Jesus Christ, but I thought of an ancient, Earth-worshipping pagan priestess.

After a time, she began to walk backwards, her fingers slipping from mine. Gradually she picked up pace. Faster and faster, until she was almost galloping in reverse. Toward the edge of the cliff. Faster and faster. The brain-wet seal leather sparkling in the early orange sun. She reached the edge, leapt backwards off the cliff, and strips of leather unravelled from her body and flapped wildly in the wind, glistening in the morning light.

She seems to hover there, glittering, forever—but I know that's just a fault of my memory.

She falls beneath the lip of the cliff, passing out of sight. I don't hear a splash.

Eventually I go back inside, drag the bodies out, and bury them.

The Dream Summer is over now. It ended many years ago, and countless men and women have stories like mine. Impossible lovers, alien friends, encounters with things neither living nor dead; famous ghosts haunting train stations, the short-term acquisition of superpowers, buildings with impossible new rooms bigger inside than out. My story will undoubtedly be just another strange tale thrown onto the pile of Dream Summer mysteries.

But, this morning, I found the deconstructed skeleton of a small bird—skull, wings, ribcage, talons...—all laid out in perfect sequence across the outside ledge of my kitchen window.

A keep-well gift from my skinless woman.