

It is often hard to know when a story actually begins. The foundations of our personalities, the things that make us uniquely ourselves, are laid down as we are knit together in our mother's womb and even our ancestors had ancestors.

My grandmother's grandmother was born and raised in the Shetland Islands, home to ponies, tweed, robust fisher-folk and tellers of tales.

In those lands that border the dark, cold waters of the North Sea, the Shetland Islands, round Mull and along the coast of Northern Island they tell stories of the selkies, the folk who live as seals in the sea but can also take human form on the land. And for this story, which has traveled the world, it was clear where to start...

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deeps and God's spirit hovered over the waters.

Then God said: "Let there be Light" and the light began. Within the light God created the creatures of light, the arch-angels, Michael, Ariel, Nathaniel, Joel, Samuel, Leviathan, Lucifer, Gabriel, Raphael, the cherubim and the seraphim. These formed the heavenly hosts. They stood in endless, serried ranks, facing the throne of the most high singing endless songs of the glory of God's awesome act and the wonder of creation and chanting the thrice-blessed hymn,

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of Hosts,
Lord God of Power,
Lord God of Power and Might.

At the end of that first day of creation, God looked at what he had done and found it good.

On the second day, God said, "Let there be created a great Vault to separate the waters of heaven from the waters of earth." So were formed the seas and the sky. And in the sky there came great clouds of white, and grey and black, swelling, rolling, drifting, rising to great heights until they finally dropped their load, allowing precious drops to return to the ocean from whence they came. God saw all of this and found it good.

The Origin of the Selkie

The third day began with the sound of gentle rain and God said, “Let land appear to separate the waters of sea and bay, strait and ocean, land with hills and valleys, cliffs and crags, rolling plains and plateau, deserts of sand and expanses of swamp. Upon the land let there be vegetation – seed bearing plants and trees heavy with fruit, swelling roots, creepers, bushes, grasses.” And so were born the callistemon, wattle, yams and the sweeping gums. This too, God saw and found good.

On the fourth day God said, “Let there be two great lights. Let them divide day from night and indicate festivals days and years. Let the greater of them govern the day and the lesser the night, so that they bring comfort to all the living creatures.” When God saw the sun and moon, he saw they were good.

When the sun rose on the fifth day God spoke again. “Let the waters team with living creatures, let birds fly above the land, let the earth team with beasts, cattle and reptiles; all things with hide, fur, feather, shells, fins and scales.” Into existence came the penguin, the whale, the eagle, gannet and pelican, the turtle, the kangaroo, quoll, echidna and the wallaby. These creatures immediately set about finding mates, building nests, digging burrows and finding shelters in which to raise their young. God was once again pleased with what had been wrought.

Then, on the sixth day, God spoke the last act of creation. “Let us create beings in our own image to be masters of all creation and to live in paradise.” Thus were the first humans created. Male and female he created them so that they might be companions for each other and live in peace and harmony. God brought before them all the birds of the air, creatures of the land and dwellers of the sea that each could be named. People were then given the freedom of the earth, to increase and multiply, to fill the earth and to enjoy all of its bounty. There was only the fruit of the one tree, the tree of knowledge, which God required to be kept only to him.

And God saw that it was good, very good so on the seventh day God rested. But the damage had been done.

The first stirrings came when Lucifer wondered why God need to create the earth when he had the heavenly hosts singing praises and glorifying him. But his

impetus to action, his tipping point, was the news that mankind was to be “master of all creation”.

Lucifer bided his time, quietly, slowly, carefully gathering around him a cohort of like-minded angels. And as is the nature of such things, eventually matters came to a head.

Lucifer and his band marched upon the Throne of the Most High and challenged him. Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, other arch-angles and the cherubim and seraphim joined in the battle that raged through the heavens. Michael and Lucifer fought with all their power and might and in the end Lucifer and his companions were defeated, cast out of the companionship and radiance of heaven into the darkness of hell where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth”.

Lucifer immediately set about seducing mankind from paradise – like a jealous child saying “If I can’t have it, no one else will!” - but that is a story for another day. Meanwhile back in heaven, God and the victorious angels were faced with the problem of the bystanders. You’ll have observed them in every situation. They’re the ones who wait to see who is going to win, or what the outcome will be before taking sides.

You can imagine that, even in forgiving, all-accepting heaven, there still were a lot of heightened tempers and emotions. The consequence of this was the banishment of these bystanders. They were not exiled to the darkness but rather cast to the earth. They were not to live and die like the other inhabitants of earth but to live in parallel and overlapping worlds with their own lore, joys and sorrows. Those who fell on the land become the fairies and the ones who fell on the sea and became the selkies.

For many years the selkies enjoyed the freedom of the water, their sense of weightlessness, for to turn and twist, dive and rise was almost like flying. But seal throats are not adapted for singing and flippers are not for dancing. So they left the sea, to throw off their seal skins and dance upon the shore, that strip that is neither sea nor land and as they danced they raised their voices in heavenly music. They sang the songs of creation as only those who have lost paradise can sing of the paradise lost.

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But as the years passed an even greater sorrow came upon them: all around they could see the ordinary seals raising pups, the fish laying eggs, the cormorant, gull and albatross teaching their young to fly and to fish; they saw some of their number taken by sharks – for even immortality cannot protect one from the teeth of the predator of the deep.

And so their singing became imbued also with their tragic longing for the children denied them and lovers lost to them.

Any mortal who hears their voices had better be like Ulysses, tied to a mast with the strongest of ropes in a boat rowed by the deafest of crews, or he too will be drawn to his doom; to love and hate, to find his soul-mate in the selkie and lose her, and often his child with her, to the deep black waters of the cold North Sea.

As the ages passed female selkies discovered that they could live upon the land for long enough to get with child and, if they birthed the child in the sea or returned to the sea before the child was weaned, that child would become a selkie.

But over the same eons men discovered that finding and hiding the skin of the selkie trapped his woman on the land. Of course there was a price for this: the selkie wife, although loving and attentive to her children, gradually wasted away. Her joy in her union with the man turned to bitterness. Her eyes grew large in her face, her skin became dry and brittle and she spent her days searching for her seal-skin and her nights walking the shore lamenting the loss of her selkie family.

And if she found the skin? One kiss for each child and, taking only the unweaned babe, down to the shore she went to plunge into the rolling waves of the black waters of the cold North Sea. But not to live in happiness – even as her body revived and her soul rejoiced she also wept as each day she returned to the shore to glimpse the children, the children of her flesh and blood, who had been left weeping upon the shore.

You can still see the decedents of the selkies today: children born with webbed toes and fingers who are skilled with fishing and show an uncanny knowledge of the

weather and you can still hear and read the tragic stories of the selkies' relationship with those who live around the cold, dark waters of the North Sea.