Skin-Walkers (Navajo Legend)

Skin-walkers are not boogiemen. They aren’t figures made up to scare children. Unlike Anglo stories of werewolves and witches, they don’t lose control and kill everything in their path or maliciously curse people for no reason. Like humans, they do kill, and like humans, they have motivations for those acts of aggression. Power and revenge fuel their murderous intent, but such things cannot occupy the brain of a rational creature all the time, and skin-walkers don’t make murder part of their daily routine.

The most fantastic stories of skin-walkers are their origin stories. Non-skin-walkers are not allowed to view the rituals of becoming a skin-walker, so the creation of such creatures is the most shrouded in mystery of all their activities. The stories say that they must kill someone of close kin to become a skin-walker, but very little evidence exists to actually support this. Some say it must just be a kill, and that the person doesn’t matter, but once again, these are the stories of those who are not invited to know anything about the initiation process and must be treated as such.

Other than their origin story, legends of skin-walkers rarely include death or even any kind of mauling. Common stories include skin-walkers in their animal form running alongside vehicles and matching their speeds whenever the driver attempts to accelerate. (FA 03 2.5.1.1.1) Eventually, they’ll get bored of this game of chase and simply disappear into the surrounding wilderness. While this leaves the drivers unsettled, it is hardly enough to even label as malicious. Rather, it seems playful, like the small dog that chases after cars that pass on the street.

More malicious but tellingly less common, are the stories of skin-walkers stalking outside the dwellings of people who are home alone. Still, they never come in, despite the fact that Navajo hogans have a hole in the top, simplifying uninvited entry. Still, the result is unsettling rather than life-ending.

The fact that there aren’t many stories of skin-walkers using their power to harm doesn’t mean there aren’t a few. The important thing to remember about skin-walkers is that they are human. Humans have created every great atrocity in history; for power or revenge, humans will go to great lengths. Skin-walkers have the ability to make sympathetic curses with the hair or clothing of their victims. Tradition dictates that Navajo people neither sweep nor comb their hair late at night when it could be captured by a skin-walker and used in a curse against them. (FA 01 400)
In the few stories that outsiders have heard of the effects of curses, they usually don’t appear to be fatal. Slow onset pain or hallucinations appear to be the extent of the curse, and visiting a medicine man always solves the problem. (FA 01 271) Once, when a friend of a skin-walker felt wronged by her stepmother, she asked for a curse to be put on her, which caused her to experience voices until a priest came and exorcised the spirit haunting her at the skin-walker’s behest. (FA 01 400) In each of the tales, the person deserved to have something happen to them, if not something so severe as a curse, but they were never left cursed to the point of death.

While it is possible that there are stories that are simply never told to outsiders that give cause to the blanket silence of those who make their home on reservations, it is also possible that they just don’t like to talk about their neighbors when they can never know which one likes to run around at night in a predator’s skin. Either way, the behavior of both the skin-walkers themselves as well as the people who live near them indicate that skin-walkers are not a story to scare children or even a warning to stay inside at night. They are real, and they are human, with all the benevolence and malevolence that comes with it.

**Examples of Skin-walkers in the Special Collections Archives**

*Yenaalglooshii: Mormon Missionary Accounts of Werewolfism on the Navajo Indian Reservation (FA 01 271)*

Many missionaries have experienced a skin-walker or ‘yee naaldlooshii’ running alongside their truck at night. They’ve also been in trailers when skin-walkers attempted to break in. Older missionaries will occasionally pretend to be skin-walkers to tease ‘greenie’ missionaries, so any tales of terrorized trailers should be filtered through a lens of hazing.

The legend that skin-walkers must kill for their power comes from people like one man who claimed to be an ex-apprentice who refused to perform the initiation rite. However, for every one story of a skin-walker killing someone, there are five more stories of a normal human shooting a skin-walker in their predator form and finding a neighbor dead or injured the next morning.

*The Legends of the Wolfmen (FA 01 389)*

One of the most poignant stories includes a young boy who followed his grandmother to the cave where she was performing skin-walker rituals. He got caught by another skin-walker and given the choice to join them or die for spying. Somehow, despite the fact that skin-walkers can run as fast as a car, the young boy was able to get away. He never saw his grandmother again.
Dogs can always tell if a skin-walker is about. If a person who is being stalked by an angry skin-walker has dogs, the dogs will bark whenever the skin-walker gets near the hogan. Many skin-walkers look like dogs in their predator forms, but they run differently. Their gate has been described as the sideways gate of a great dog that has human legs folded up inside it.