

## Legs and tails

I am glad I have two legs. I like having two of a lot of things: arms, eyes, ears, hands. Of other things I am happy to have only one. Like my stomach, my back, my head. I can't imagine how to manage more than one body. Or less. Only a tail might be nice, as an extra part. If I would see a nice man my tail would rise naturally to show my interest, as a discrete but clear signal. I would prefer a tail that I could grow for special occasions, and then remove afterwards. I don't want my body to become too independent and draw attention to itself without my consent.

Morphing with another animal seems to be a complicated and tricky affair. Your body becomes a collage, suffering a doubled state of phantom pain. Mermaids, sirens, sphinxes and centaurs - they are beautiful but haunted creatures, incomplete or overcomplete mixtures of humans, fish, horses and lions.

I once visited the Coney Island Circus Sideshow in New York, where freaks, wonders and human curiosities still perform in the tradition of the circus sideshows of the nineteenth century. The show I attended featured different performers, among others Lady Elektra. While she had a huge electric chair installed on the stage, Lady Elektra announced she would need a volunteer from the audience. As no one raised their hand, she inspected the crowd to select someone herself. Then she picked me.

She summoned me onto the stage, put me on the chair and electrocuted me. The chair crackled and buzzed, lights flashed, smoke appeared. When the last sizzle died out, she announced to the public I was now under high voltage, as she would demonstrate. She explained I was loaded with so much electricity, she could light a match on me. The easiest way would be to bring the match in contact with a humid part of my body, she said. I was getting worried. A humid place on my body. What would she have in mind?

I could only think of one place, a place I certainly was not eager to expose to the audience. While Lady Elektra turned to me to proceed, she saw my frightened face and burst out in laughter. As she threw back her head and opened her mouth, I saw her tongue. It was split in half, ending in two sharp points. I was still staring at her mouth when she told me to stick out my tongue. I did, and she lit the match on it.

After neutralizing me she sent me back to my seat, my tongue still sitting in my mouth like an alien element. After a few acts by different performers, Lady Elektra re-appeared on stage. Now she was Serpentina, the snake charmer. While I saw her conducting her huge snakes, her devilish branched tongue started making sense. She was a snakelady: part woman, part snake. But her double tongue was discretely hidden in the cave of her mouth. I don't know if anyone else in the audience saw it except me.

While I write this, I am sitting with my legs in a trashbin filled with water. I bought a big grey plastic bin at the Blokker, and the past days I have used it every morning to soak my legs. I fill the bin with the content of eight water kettles and fifteen teaspoons of Biotex washing powder. After stirring the mixture with a big spoon I put my legs in to disinfect a few wounds. Sea water would work as well, but the sea is too far away. My legs fit exactly in the bin when I press them together tightly like a secretary from the fifties in a pencil skirt. This is the closest I ever got to being a mermaid. My bathing sessions in the bin remind me of being tucked into a sleeping bag. Once you are zipped up you are trapped. If you want to move, you have to wriggle around with your legs bound together like a fish on land. I always feel pity for mermaids. I imagine they actually have two legs and somehow got stuck inside a fish.

Some years ago I participated in a drag king workshop, in which me and a bunch of other women were going to learn how to transform ourselves into men. The butch lesbian that lead the workshop started out warning us that the afternoon would not be about making perfect penis prostheses and stylish moustaches and sideburns. Focussing only on our exterior

transformation would be a waste of time: the true challenge was to mentally transform ourselves into men, and change our behaviour.

We started the workshop with an exercise. The workshop leader asked us to observe the way we were sitting. She picked my friend Katia as an example of the way women tend to sit. Katia had her legs crossed and her arms in her lap, her limbs neatly tucked away against her torso. The workshop leader asked her why she was sitting like that, making her body so compact. Katia answered: 'I take as much space as I need.'

Most of us were sitting in our chairs similarly, our limbs filed away in order not to stick out wasting space - like impenetrable mermaids. The workshop leader suggested we would reverse our behaviour, and try to occupy as much space as possible. This would be the first step to transform into men.

It's funny that both mermaids and sirens are passive hunters. They try to lure men away from their tracks, but their prey has to come over by themselves – the mermaids and sirens can't chase them down. They can signal them, but they can't attack. They are forced to use their voice or beauty to seduce their male targets to make an approach. This may seem a very classic casting of roles in the battle of the sexes. But if you think of it, the situation in the streets is quite different from the situation at sea. In the streets, it's usually the men that hiss, whistle and shout at the women, not the other way around.

The radical feminist Valerie Solanas, famous for her attempt to kill Andy Warhol, wrote in her manifesto of the Society for Cutting Up Men: 'The male is obsessed with screwing; he'll swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there'll be a friendly pussy awaiting him.'

In case of mermaids and sirens there is no friendly pussy awaiting the men, possibly not even a pussy. Only death. If you imagine a man prepared to make such a disgusting crossing to obtain pussy, you can only wish the poor bastard gets it in the end, and feel sorry for him he had to go through so much to get lucky. But the lady on the other end is also hardly enviable, having to wait behind the snot and the vomit for a desperate idiot to come through.

I never wanted to be a fish or a bird. I wanted to be a cat. Or at least a cat woman, like Minoes. Minoes is the heroine of one of my favourite children's books, written by Annie M.G. Schmidt. Minoes used to be a cat, but after eating from a rubbish dump of chemical trash she transformed into a lady. Although by appearance she is a completely normal human being, she can still communicate with cats after her metamorphosis. She also has some other cat habits left. She still has a keen interest in mice and birds for example, and a huge fear of dogs. She continues to scratch and purr. When she takes a liking to a man called Tibbe, she rubs her head against him.

After some time, Minoes adapts more and more to her new human body and the human society. Then she finally discovers a way to turn back into a cat. She can be cured if she eats a live bullfinch. But Minoes has become so humanized already, that her pity for the bird overrules her appetite. Her feelings for Tibbe are getting in the way too. Minoes decides to stay a lady, although she will always long for the days she was a cat.

I am not sure if I still would like to be a cat. Of course they have more legs. And a tail. But I would always miss my days as a human. If I would have to choose a different shape today, I would opt for the sea. A body in constant flux, not going anywhere, but in constant motion. Nurturing, killing and holding other bodies, waving in an endless hello and goodbye. Mermaids, sailors, fish, boats – keeping them all together. But of course I would yearn to be shore, and dream of merging with the land.

Text by Richtje Reinsma for *Siren and the Sea*, a performance and video installation by Malin Ståhl, presented by WAAR Projects in Barry/W139, Amsterdam on September 8<sup>th</sup> 2012.