

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii

AARON RAZ LINK

3	The Sea
12	ABC
25	Love Gets Strange
48	Rebel without a Cause
59	Burying Ophelia
63	Not Coming Out
67	Psychological Considerations
98	Surgery I
109	Still Life with Hormones
116	A Wonderful Life
122	The Sex Change
129	Surgery II
156	Freaks
160	Testosterone
170	Men
172	Service
181	Flaunting
192	The Myth of Fingerprints
201	Token
205	My Mother's Ring

HILDA RAZ

The Book and Its Cover	223
Fact/Fiction	229
The Letter	238
Scars	240
Surgery	242

Stock	248
Bias	259
Pity and Laughter	262
Girls Just Want to Have Fun	264
Reading Garber	272
Looking at Aaron	281
Watching Aaron Teach	289
Three-Minute Autobiography	293

Preface

What Becomes You has taken us ten years to write.

One of the authors is a teacher, magazine editor, poet, and a participant in public conversations about women's lives and work. The other is a scientist, teacher, and historian as well as a performer, an investigator of our myths of difference—status, race, gender, sex. We have chosen to write this book not from a theoretical perspective but from a lifetime of family and professional collaboration. Part of our contribution is the reminder that life explodes all theories.

Our best teachers in living and writing this book have not been those who offer neatly bounded abstract explanations, regardless of intellectual discipline or radical/conservative flavor. The real experts were messily making a fuss—performing on stages, pages, and the streets, wearing clown noses, mastering the arts of illness, exploring the body's limits, dancing in wheelchairs, representing themselves in multiple colors, cultures, and tongues. This book represents a fragment of that work, a forty-year collaboration between the authors in the fine art of making a fuss—or, paraphrasing Emile Zola—living out loud.

What Becomes You is a work of nonfiction. *Nonfiction* is a funny word. It tells us in bold and definite terms what something isn't while leaving us completely in the dark about what it is. But, as they used to say on Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*, all the events here, whether actual or created, depict authenticated facts.

Aaron Raz Link did indeed have a sex change, and Hilda Raz did indeed give birth to him, with original equipment, and we did indeed write this book. But this book is a work of creative nonfiction. While the events described actually happened (and if you buy this book you will indeed find a graphic and accurate description of his penis), the interpretations of events by the characters with our names are not always those of the authors. And sometimes we don't agree with them, or each other. The Big Truth we learned (okay, there are five more Big Truths hidden in the text,

Preface

and we're not going to tell you where they are) is that reality is in the mind of the beholder.

Scientifically speaking, years have passed since most of the events described in this book happened, and most of our cells have been replaced by new ones. The authors have become whole new people. In fact, the people appearing in this book aren't even made of cells. They're made of paper and what we hope is nontoxic ink. Which brings us to another term for what this book is: *memoir*. In other words, it's a story—a story the authors believe is true because it happened to them. In *What Becomes You*, the story is about a man, a woman, and a sex change. The soundtrack is mostly without violins. We've included other stories—ones about men, women, family, and the roles we expected to play as men and women, straights and queers, majorities and minorities, subjects and authorities, and heroes and villains and clowns.

This book also is not autobiography. The full story of Aaron's life includes an episode where he is suspending prechilled butterflies from his boss's eyebrows for a segment of *Good Morning America*, hiking in the Grand Canyon with his family, and performing theatre in three countries on two continents and in drag on the high school lawn of the Hoopa Indian Reservation. These were good times. If this book were autobiography, they'd be included. Aaron's experience also includes an amazing family that has welcomed him through a sex change as well as several other equally interesting adventures, and allows him to boast that his relatives include several brilliant teachers, musicians, and writers, a painter, a photojournalist, a chef, a composer, a graphic artist, and a guy who does some juggling. For instance, when Aaron and his brother John were kids, their dad made them their very own submarine along with Star Trek communicators and pirate swords. This generosity was not only great, it was part of that rarest and most precious of experiences, a childhood safe and rich with both dreams and the resources necessary to believe they will come true. Trust us, if this were autobiography, you'd see these stories on every page.

But this book isn't Aaron's life or a picture of a world the authors know and love. It is a book about pieces that didn't fit the picture. As a result, the most confusing and difficult pieces play the largest roles. We think this

Preface

story of pieces that don't fit is a little bit of the story of all our lives, but that's up to you to decide.

In the first years Aaron spent creating his life as a man in the world, he did not want anyone else to write or speak of him as a woman. This restriction made Hilda's job a little more difficult.

Aaron is a man, and his gender experience of springing full-blown into the world at thirty is an experience of the body, a man's body, and the roles men play. He stepped through that door and saw wonderful things. Somewhere along the line he realized other men also see and feel these things, but from the moment of their birth they are conditioned to silence. He was not. He got very interested in talking.

But left behind was a strange sense of something else important, something left out of that story. Aaron doesn't remember ever being a woman. Because he could not say anything about his experience of being a woman, he didn't want anyone else to talk about the same thing. About *their* experience of his being a woman. But Hilda remembers. It's a tricky business.

One of our friends has suffered profound brain damage, which changed his body, personality, and memory. We asked him once if he ever felt, as Aaron did, a sense of responsibility for this other person he can't remember—the person his loved ones remember he was.

"No," he said. "Not at all."

"Why not?" we asked.

He smiled. "Because I can't. That person doesn't belong to me."

In the end both Hilda and Aaron had to give up the person they thought belonged to them. What they gained is the people they are now and each other. And this book.

As far as the authors go, we continue to enjoy duking it out with our former selves on a regular basis, a kind of do-it-yourself Fight Club. Hilda has continued to write and publish, teach poetry to graduate and undergraduate university students, and edit a magazine. She still lives in the same house where Aaron grew up as Sarah.

Aaron has transitioned once again, this time from Professional Biology Educator and Historian and Philosopher of Science to guy who does some

Preface

clowning and acting. This is not as big a leap as you might think, given that one of the grafts performed during the sex change was the addition of a sense of humor. Though this procedure can be extremely painful, especially when performed on a person's most sensitive areas, we highly recommend it to all our readers.

The Sea

When I was five years old I decided to become a scientist. My mother had bought me a book, the first of a mail-order library on biology topics; one would arrive every couple of months, and I'd wait for them like the Fourth of July. The first one was called *The Sea*. I thumbed raptly through it; the only thing wrong with this book was that a couple of pages in the middle seemed to be stuck together. Finally, more curious to know what was on these pages than in the whole rest of the book put together, I tried to pry them apart. What I had thought were two pages unfolded into one, falling open like Pandora's box, spilling its contents across the floor. The page was a glossy color portrait, cross-sectioned like a medical chart: the secret insides of the ocean. I grew up in Nebraska. I had never seen the ocean. I recognized only the fish, which seemed insignificant among the brightly colored objects of this world. Were they buildings? Decorations? Geologic features, internal organs of some huge oceanic body? At the bottom of the picture was a strip of yellow paper. On it, in a curious stagger suggestive of meaning, were printed the most incredible words: "Pink-Hearted Hydroids." "Dead Men's Fingers." In a sudden rush of understanding, I realized that the objects were *living creatures*, and these were their *names*. The pattern of the printing matched the place of each creature in the picture above. I spent hours working the words over, pointing to each portrait, naming all the animals. Everything made sense. It was like Helen Keller with her fingers in the water, feeling words form for the first time.

Everything makes sense now.

Taxonomy is the science of naming, of relationships. It makes order out of chaos, arranging the bewildering world of experience into understandable categories: *Hallucigenia sparsa*, *Felis catus*, *Homo sapiens*, *one*, *no*, *four*, *no*, *five*, *no*, *wait*, *only one subspecies* . . .

These names create and document an agreement about the nature of

Aaron Raz Link

the world we live in. Underneath that knowledge is another, deeper understanding—that when we look at something, we make up what we see. Taxonomists are science’s dictionary writers, the invisible magicians of the mind. We invent the categories. Then everyone believes in them. We do, too.

People have to believe in something.

I believed, more than anything, that I wanted to be a taxonomist. Taxonomists create two kinds of ordering systems, *natural* and *artificial*. Natural taxonomies arise out of differences within the bodies and lives of the creatures named; the creatures sort themselves out, in a way, and the investigator merely records the result. Artificial taxonomies are designed to create an arbitrary but useful order for outside investigators. You might say a natural taxonomy reflects the true order of the universe, and an artificial taxonomy is just somethin’ somebody made up. In another light, an artificial taxonomy is one somebody knows they made up, and a natural taxonomy is one they don’t know they made up.

To be a good taxonomist, all you have to do is figure out which kinds of order are natural and which are artificial.

The work of a taxonomist begins with paradox. Sometimes you discover conflicting records that are supposed to refer to the same creature, but these descriptions cannot be reconciled; they seem to refer to different types entirely. If you’re a taxonomist, reconciliation is what, as they used to say, separates the men from the boys.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Raz Link creates theatrical shows and exhibits. His most recent exhibit, *Other Visions*, documented the art and culture of the extremely little-known Outremer people. Aaron has performed and toured internationally, taught and created with the object theatre company *Lunatique Fantastique*, the Clown Conservatory of the San Francisco School of Circus Arts, *Hand2Mouth Theatre*, *Tabuki Theatre*, *2Gyrlz Performative Arts*, *Sojourn Theatre*, and enough festivals, conferences, schools, and LGBT community venues that the list won’t fit in this space. He’s been a maskmaker and street performer in Portland, Oregon, and is happy to say that drag queens sent him

to clown school, making him a graduate of the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre.

From the author's professional résumé, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Link is a professional naturalist and historian of science (BA, Biological Sciences, Washington University, St. Louis MO, 1986; MA, History and Philosophy of Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison WI, 1989). Link attended college on a merit-based full scholarship in the humanities. In graduate school Link specialized in the history of representation, studying scientific justifications of social prejudices and writing a thesis on the work of Charles LeBrun, a French court painter whose combined human-animal figures document the basis of our scientific and popular stereotypes of ethnicity, culture, age, and class. Link spent the next seven years as a professional naturalist and teacher, working in a number of major American museums and zoos.

From the author's professional résumé, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

She is EXQUISITE—one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen. Enormous golden brown eyes, shaped like mine but lighter and luminous brown-gold. Their expression is alternately wise or coy or amused. She flirts and pouts without crying, for effect. Her hair is fine and flyaway with some curl and waving at the ends and beautiful in color: a light brown streaked with blond. Navy blue and black look best on her—unorthodox for a small girl but very becoming nonetheless. Her father *adores* her. She often tilts her chin down and looks up, always with the same effect: the observing adult is struck dumb by her—is it beauty? A Florida friend described it as an attention/intensity of expression. All is focused on her eyes. I've seen strange and nonsympathetic doctors, good friends, tradespeople react to her in the same way. Truly a fine asset for a woman!

From the journals of Hilda Raz, 18 January 1967

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FEMALE TRANSEXUALISM. **Clinical Features** Female transsexuals, though anatomically normal, are the most masculine of females. . . . these females are exclusively homosexual if measured by the anatomy of their sex objects, but are heterosexual if measured by identity. As with the males, they do not deny their anatomic sex, but they are, nonetheless, unendingly preoccupied with the sense of really being men. . . . Usually, as a child, this girl refuses to be a girl. . . . [from adolescence] she successfully appears as a male . . . without anyone suspecting her true sex. . . . At birth, this infant is seen by her parents as not being pretty or cuddly . . . her mother is unavailable for mothering. . . . This process is furthered from the start by the infant's unlovely appearance; had she been considered feminine, she would not have served as well for molding into masculinity. . . . From the start, female transsexualism is the product of trauma, frustration, conflict, and defensive resolution of the resulting pain. This [diagnosis] puts female transsexuals on a continuum with other very masculine women.”

From Harold I. Kaplan, MD, and Benjamin J. Sadock, MD, eds.,
Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry IV, 4th ed. (1985)

Bias often appears in systems of classification. Irresponsible (or inexperienced) taxonomists do their classifying based on a small number of examples; their prejudices assume that all individuals will match the sample they're familiar with. *Exempli gratia*:

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

They're second graders; the ones who ask the question always are.

“What do you think I am?”

“Well,” the small faces screw tight, thinking hard. “You don't have lipstick. You've got short hair. You're wearing pants, and, and, you don't have any makeup, and—” struggling to articulate the defining characteristics of the type here, “you go in the mud and stuff.” They look up at me expectantly, confused. There's something else about me, though, something strange. They can't figure out what it is. Neither can I; my question puts off the moment when I have to give them an answer.

Once I asked a girl about six what she thought I was. She looked up shyly from her little velvet dress with its matching tights and patent-leather shoes. I was wearing my Victorian Explorer suit: spotless canvas drill pants and crisp blond photographer's vest. I was holding live tarantulas. I was a hundred feet tall. She leaned toward me and whispered, "I think you're a girl." Her eyes were bright with hope.

I bent down and lied for her, as if this were an act of mercy.

Good taxonomy depends on hard fieldwork. Responsible taxonomists gather as many specific examples as possible. One of my childhood heroes, the taxonomist Alfred Kinsey, gathered five million gall wasp specimens for one study and eighteen thousand surveys of human sexual practices for another. Good taxonomists know that *normal*, *average*, and *right* are words for three different concepts, the last of which is a moral judgment; it isn't taxonomy's job. They seek out individuals at every extreme of the type's range, to understand their variations.

Taxonomic classification is based on three factors: morphology, behavior, and genetics.

In spite of problematic areas—the frequent lack of correlation between variations in a single gene and complex features of morphology or behavior, historical connections between the theories of American and Nazi genetics—genetics remains the primary modern tool of division.

In basic science books I learned that human genes are arranged into twenty-three pairs of bundles called chromosomes. Twenty-two pairs are identical in men and women. The twenty-third pair comes in two forms: two similar chromosomes (XX) or two different ones (XY). People with two similar sex chromosomes are women. People with two different sex chromosomes are men. I quickly graduated to advanced textbooks, where I learned other interesting facts; in birds, for instance, the reverse is true. Also, some textbooks will give different information. For instance, the first researcher to publish a count of human chromosomes simply miscounted; the wrong number, often accompanied by a correct photograph, was re-published in generations of textbooks.

In humans and other mammals, many other combinations occur in addition to XX and XY: XXY, single X (XO), and so on. In my textbooks such people were described as having stunted growth, mental retardation,

and other disorders. There was, however, a description of a small Latin American village where XY children are often born with what appear to be normal female genitals. When they go through puberty, testosterone levels trigger the descent of their testicles into the lips of their vaginas, which become a scrotum. Their clitorises grow, becoming penises. They grow beards instead of breasts. The book concluded that they all became perfectly normal men; that is, they all stopped wearing dresses and got married to women. It did not mention that they also have smaller than usual penises, a rudimentary vaginal opening, and a split scrotum, as I do. A different syndrome in XX individuals creates male genitals of typical appearance; genetic sex is only visible at puberty, by menstruation through the penis.

Though genetics is the modern standard, genes are invisible. They are properties of cells, not individuals. Determining genetics directly requires killing the specimen, monitoring its breeding, or keeping its tissues in a restricted, sterile environment. As a result, most types are divided by other standards, which are assumed to be genetic. For instance, my genetic sex (XX, without intersex conditions) is not known directly but indicated by the fact that at twelve years of age, my body appeared and functioned like that of an average-looking, normal adult female. Morphology, the visible form of the body, is the oldest and most common standard by which individuals are classified.

The light is dim in the little antique store. My friend and I have just moved into our first home together. He's tall, skinny, delicate, unathletic. I'm eighteen, which means Victorian Explorer has been knocked out by a black T-shirt, cowboy boots, and a five-buck buzz cut. Our decorating budget is a penny jar.

A man emerges from the back room. I think he's going to kick us out, because you're supposed to have money in this part of town. We keep coming back because there's no place else in Missouri for us to go. I bend over a case of expensive old jewelry and try to look serious. The man slips up with a sliding walk. His voice is wispy and exuberant, punctuated by extravagant and graceful gestures. Without our saying anything, he seems to understand how it is with us: no money, the need for beauty like air, a refuge in the face of bigotry and isolation. I start relaxing; for the first

time in a long time I feel at home. So I stand up to join the man with my friend, holding salvaged prisms to the light, spreading rainbows. He sees the tits then.

Suddenly he goes cold and formal. He says “Mister and Missus,” talks football to my friend, says “your wife” and “the little woman,” biting off the bitter words. He hates them as much as we do. The prism comes down out of the light. We buy it anyway, lose it for a few months, find it again, pretend it is new. In the cold of winter, we needed rainbows. Besides, by then I could wear my leather jacket all the time. I never took it off anymore.

Since wild animals are difficult to observe closely, morphological (or “traditional”) taxonomists kill unusual-looking specimens to identify them or depend on easily observed surface features like color and plumage. Since these are often the same features that wild creatures use to identify each other, morphological taxonomy is effective. But only as long as in the wild, each type is clearly and separately marked.

Other taxonomies accept that creatures may appear in many different dresses in different parts of their range while belonging to the same fundamental type. What remains in these cases is behavior. Certain creatures, for instance, are indistinguishable in appearance but are considered separate species because they will not breed with each other. Different habits or dissimilar songs isolate them.

I’m eighteen. I’m standing in front of the college library when a young woman races up to me, shouting, apparently overwhelmed with joy. I’m still looking for the friend she’s greeting when she seizes my arm. “Hey,” she says, “wanna join a lesbian group?” I stare at her. Her face falls. She is young and energetic and earnest and it’s like I’ve kicked a puppy. “You are a lesbian, aren’t you?” she stammers. “Oh, God . . .”

Her friends are making large disapproving gestures at her from a safe distance. They piss me off. I awkwardly admit some affinity with homosexuals. Her face lights back up. “Sure you are. Well, I mean even if you aren’t sure, come anyway. We’ll have a wonderful time. There’s food,” she adds hopefully.

I spend an afternoon at what seems to be a Girl Scout meeting. Instead of cookies, sewing, and leadership, we have revolution, patriarchy, and

leadership. Actually, there are cookies. The women sing a song. They talk about their breasts. I do not talk about their breasts; that would be rude. They mention casually but repeatedly how the problem with everything is men. I seem to be out of the bonding loop.

One of the women once shared her supper with me, on a night I was hungry and cold and didn't have a dime. At the time it seemed an incomprehensible, perfect act of generosity. Now I realize she did it because she thought I was a lesbian.

I quietly avoid future meetings. But early one morning she shows up at my home. She seems concerned about my friend, who has answered the door in his bathrobe, deeply embarrassed, trying to hide his hairy legs from view. She's afraid he's furious she's here. She thinks something bad might happen. She asks me if I am okay in this situation. I don't tell her about the scar on his knee where the knife I threw at the wall rebounded, how he's decided being hit is better than being alone, the nights I spend crying in my beer and listening to Joe Jackson wonder who the real men are. She tells me she no longer sees any point in trying to read anything from other than a lesbian-feminist perspective.

In practice, most taxonomists use a combination of all three approaches in order to classify the living world. The struggle of all taxonomists is to find a way of naming that makes sense to them, to the nature of the creature named, and to other investigators. Taxonomists also classify themselves as *lumpers* and *splitters*—those who tend to include unusual individuals within an established group and those who divide groups to ensure that each group contains only similar individuals.

He writes me a nice letter. He's heard I'm transsexual. He's afraid of offending me, he doesn't want to assume anything, but he'd like to talk. He tells me he has Klinefelter's syndrome (XXY), one of the defects described in my textbooks next to nude photos against grids of measurement, black bars over the eyes. Doctors gave him treatment while he was still a kid, he says; testicular implants, hormones that helped him grow tall, put on muscle, grow hair, lose hair (he laughs and pats his balding head), make his penis grow. He got everything I wanted, without question. His package deal came with a tour in Vietnam, then seventies big-city gay life, AIDS,

and a lot of questions his VA doctors won't answer. He's a few years older than I am.

We talk shop for two hours, laughing in sheer relief—swapping dosage information, names of good doctors, pharmacies, research on hormones, liver damage, keeping things up: spirits and strength and fight and weight and dicks and syringes. People drive by. Their windows reflect a middle-aged boot fag and a baby dyke, talking together, or maybe a couple of queers, or people.

Every specimen needs a record. State: county, city or township, range, quarter, date collected. Specimens without records are useless; who knows what jurisdiction they may fall under, which categories must be enlarged to include them. God, as my mother would say, is in the details.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Snout-vent length 87.5 cm, right hind foot 21 cm, weight 70 kg. Tail absent. Oregon: Multnomah County, City of Portland, southeast quarter, 2005. Significant deviations from type.