

Niña Weijers - This article

This article is about the freshwater fish that is used for the treatment of skindiseases. Consider the red garra for the fish that is also known as the doctor fish. For the fish known as the surgeon fish, see the unicornfish. For people who are known as Fish, see Fish (surname).

We are a ray-finned class of fish from the carp family. The most distinguishable features of the carp are the following: An absent stomach, Modified stirrup bones with throat teeth, An absence of teeth in the jaws.

We consider that last fact to be crucial. After centuries of relative calm in the rivers of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq at the start of this millennium, we were displaced from our homes. We were dispersed all across the world and ended up in drab bathing spots, improvised Wellness Centres, dilapidated stalls in China and Indonesia, Japan and Croatia. With our soft, toothless mouths we swim in basins of lukewarm water, hungry, longing for the algae we ate in the rivers of our origins, our delicious, rich rivers where the water wasn't still as it is here, but kept flowing endlessly. In stead of the algae, we eat human skin. That is our labour, eating the fat, dried layer of skin on old, outgrown feet. We eat because we are hungry, not because we consider such feet to be a delicacy.

There are predators that resemble their prey so that they may catch them unguarded. There are harmless animals that look like dangerous ones in order to protect themselves against danger. Unfortunately, we are a harmless breed that resemble cures for human ailments.

We hear you think: there are fish that are worse off; fish that are baked or steamed with thyme and lemon and eaten by humans; fish that must dive through hoops. There are depressed Orkas in captive, with droopy fins that hang from sheer misery (but orkas are not fish).

You presume we aren't sensitive because we look so nondescript; small and grey-ish baked fish, mere bycatch. You presume we only have one function, the function you have assigned for us, namely eating human skin. You assume so because

throughout the history of your existence, you always assumed that other species conform to the function you have in store for them.

The cuckoo disguises itself as a sparrow in order to leave her egg in another bird's nest. The egg camouflages itself as one of the eggs of the mother-host. The cuckoo youths chase away the remaining chicks from the nest.

The venomous coral snake disguises itself as the harmless milk snake.

The bush cricket imitates the mating call of the female cicada in order to bait the males and gobble them up.

The praying mantis has the appearance of a dead leaf, and lets itself flutter from a branch revealing a flair for the dramatic.

The stone puts on a snakeskin. The tree stump rolls from its place and imitates the sound it makes so convincingly that it appears real.

We're only small fishes; small, funny fishes that tickle your weary hands and feet with our toothless, sucking mouths. Call us Doctor fish, therapeutic fish, nibble fish.

We are small but plentiful and wait patiently for the water to spill over the edges of our basins into the Lozingscanal, the Amstel, the Maas, the Waal, the Rhine, the Mekong, the Yangtze, the Shinano... until we have become red garra, unicorn fish and dolphins in algae and plankton, in the stream of the water itself, that mirrors life, so meticulously that you won't even be able to tell one from the other.

translated by Daniel Vorthuys