Under the Sea

List of Actors

He- the small voice in the back of your mind; controlled, precise, angry
12 year old me- free but simple
16 year old me- curious but ignorant
18 year old me- love struck and foolish
Almost 19 year old me- Sharp and closed off
You- a bystander

You sit in a wooden chair, assured, and comfortable aside from your back resting on the hard, unyielding surface. He speaks to you now and you fidget just a bit: just a twinge in your shoulders, surprised that He’s here with you. He stands just behind you and the heat from him bleeds into your back. He’s just out of your view. Like an old fashion film reel lights and darks flicker against the screen in front of the both of you. You listen and see. You hear him begin to pace back and forth.
“I want to be like a fish,” A 12 year old version of myself managed to say over the roar of a lunch room. She’s surrounded by busy grey bodies but she’s facing towards you. “I heard that they switch between being a male and a female like every year. That’s what I want. I can’t remember why I’m saying it but I remember saying it half a dozen times at all different places besides here. ‘I don’t want to stay a boy forever,’ I would continue. It would be cool getting to be one for a while though.”

*His voice is deep and gravely when he speaks.* “I wanted to be a fish; fish were free to change.”

*The feeling starts in your neck.*

“I’m 17 when I hear it, somewhere in tune with disassociation. I know both words well.”

*The girl on screen is deaf to his words, silently talking to the grey bodies around her.*

“Dysphoria”

*Static plays. Scenes change. On screen another version of myself stands surrounded by a veil of black with only a spotlight on her: body straight at a rod with hands folded against her lower back, expression a word away from anger. She is days away from 19 and speaks sharply.*

“The dictionary defines dysphoria as a state of uneasiness or a generally dissatisfaction with life. It's like the word depression or panic: it's the type of thing that is difficult to express in words so the definition is underwhelming. Dysphoria can mean many different things and to me it means this: it's the feeling I get in my chest when I'm conformed to one gender. It feels sort of like throwing up but instead of your stomach it's your heart twisting in knots begging to crawl out of your throat. I'm androgynous, so dysphoria is a given. I exist in in-betweens and the light of euphoria can’t reach between the cracks of binary gender to shine for me.”

*The screen flicks to white and the light hurts your eyes. It’s like a blink but you swear you swear it was there you saw that light. The heat behind you grows.*
The scene is the same veil of darkness with a single spotlight now on me at 18. She is playing with her hands nervously like a child might. Her expression is a smile easily seen through. She speaks like she’s reminiscing a sad dream.

“Emily and I were driving home after picking up Chinese food. The food sat warm on my lap with a miniskirt and stockings separating it from my skin. I had wished I had on jeans so I could leave my legs wide instead of having them closed together.”

You feel a twitch in your hip, like a pressure right against the joint. You want to move.

Her tone is light and easy and her eyes flick between you and her hands. The memory is still as fresh and clear to her as her words are to you now.

“Would you call me your boyfriend? If I honestly wanted to be referred to as male and you had to introduce me or something, would you?” I had asked. She had never even considered calling me he, but her no made my heart clench up and pitter patter against my ribs like a bird discovering its cage. She didn’t want to sacrifice her identity for mine: a lesbian doesn’t date boys, doesn’t have boyfriends. I felt my heart clench up tight, but I didn’t want to fight.”

He seethes with anger for a girl that was love struck. His voice is controlled, she can’t hear him but he scorns her like she can.

“She’s just as sick as you are of being told she’s wrong. She doesn’t speak much about it but when she does you can feel the barbs she’s had over the years of ‘not right you’re lying. Liar liar’. She was fair to not compromise her identity for someone else. But what did that mean for yours? Why do you have to sacrifice for her?”

Your shoulders feel too small, like something’s binding them down. You roll them back and it feels better but not quite- no it’s not quite right.
The spot light shifts left to 16 year old me sitting in a chair like yours. Her hair is shorter and her eyes bright as she begin to regal you with her story.

“Since I was born female binding and packing are a big part of passing. Binding is when you compress the fat on your chest to resemble a man’s chest. Typically you can use binders, which are sort of like really tight sports bras.”

*He whispers harshly, and you barely hear him.* “It’s tight. Why is there even something there? Why? I don’t want this.”

“Sometimes it’ll hurt to breathe in. For me binding was never a big issue, it’s all baggy shirts and lots of layers. Packing is different. Packing is a thing you can do pre-bottom surgery. Basically you pack your pants to make it look like you have a cock.

*The light flashes back to almost 19 year old me standing stark.*

“I’ve never been comfortable or uncomfortable with my genitalia. I’ve never been anything: I just am and it just is.” *The notion comes across as a shaking breath from the almost 19 year old me. The words aren’t as sharp or heavy to the ignorant 16 year old as they are to you and him. You wonder for a moment if these girls are capable of lying.*

*Your legs are wrong. You rub your palms hip to knee, scoot back in your seat and keep your legs wide apart.*

*He fills in the silence as the light flicks to 16 year old me.*

“At 16 years old I was just coming into my gender and sexual identities.” *He pauses and practically snarls.* “I didn’t know shit”
On screen she smiles and there’s a laugh in her voice because her palms are sweaty and you can tell. Her hair’s gotten longer since you last saw her but still not as long as it would be. She can’t decide wither she wants to cut it or not. She’s sitting like you are, surrounded by the veiled darkness and the spotlights halo of light.

“The whole experience was just finding words that expressed feelings I’ve always had inside. It’s a really complicated process but it was important to me. My mother was extremely supportive and that’s really why my dysphoria in internal: there wasn’t an external trigger in my safe place.”

*He sounds in pain, almost confused.*

“Safe place is home. No hurt. No stop it make it stop it’s not right wrong wrong wrong wrong. Home is safe and safe is silent calm.”

“I never had to worry about her rejecting me, and even if our relationship isn’t transparent, I know I’ll always be loved.”

*He grazes the rim of your ear with a breath. You aren’t sure when He got so close. The 16 year old me fidgets on screen.*

“My mother is 5’ 5” and has arms strong enough to wring a man’s neck. Growing up I always heard “The Story of the $75 Red Inside-Out Champion Sweatshirt”: at 16 she broke a man’s face because he hurt her sister. My mother was the person who raised me. She’s what I envision as a woman-figure growing up.”

*His tone is dry and he speaks absently into your ear and you barely hear a smile.*

“She owns a dozen pairs of heels and only wears them when she’s made to. Twice I’ve seen her in a dress. She never leaves the house without makeup on.”
The whole scene shifts through a moment of light again. You see the long car ride to college. Between Mama driving and me sitting in anticipation there wasn’t a struggle to fill silence.

“It’s funny when I think about it,” She ashes her cigarette, takes another drag before throwing it out the window all together. “When you were little you hated pink- absolutely hated it. And now it’s everything cute and girly.” There wasn’t an insult or accusation, just an observation.

“What I didn’t want to be a princess?” I joked already knowing the answer. My shoes are off and my feet rest flat against the dashboard. I’m comfortable in my jeans.

Mama scoffed in that way she does when she knows I’m being sarcastic but still appreciated the humor. “No, I don’t think you ever wanted to be a princess.”

You scratch your forearm then try to rub away the pain. Your nails are too long, you forgot. You have to cut them.

The screen flashes white and back to the veiled dark. On screen 18 year old me once more, sitting with her legs wide and hands moving with her words as she tells a story.

“There are about a thousand different sites about passing and over the course of two years I’ve read a lot of them. I’d never really met anyone who wasn’t cisgender and for a very long time I didn’t even understand I was something other than cis.”

He cuts through the pause and you can practically hear him waving his arms as he paces behind you. His tone is still angry and spiteful.

“Born female raised female. You can only be one you can’t change. Those are your options and you can’t change now you’ve already started playing.”
“I knew I wasn’t just a girl but I didn’t want to be just a boy either.”

“I didn’t want to be either, I wanted to be a fish” 12 year old me shouts from the lunch room.

18 year old me scoffs without bothering to turn and look back at her. She’s a year away from seeing the depth to the words.

“I didn’t have anyone to talk to in person so I relied on internet people who went through similar experiences. I focused on trans* and genderqueer stories because I was so focused on presenting as male at that part of my coming to self.”

You run your fingers through your hair. Wrong wrong. It’s too long you have to cut it.

“At 16 my feelings were internal, there was no accepting my androgyny because I didn’t even know that’s what I was. At 16 it was all a hazy gray filling up my mind so I didn’t have to think too hard about things.”

His voice sounds panicked but ferocious.

“So I don’t have to drown in dysphoria’s depths but I wasn’t clawing chasing grasping at euphoria’s light.”

“At 16 I read article after article about packing, all the while in this state of semi-embarrassment and semi-amazement. It was as if I had found a puzzle piece I had given up looking for: it felt like I could be complete.”

He half whispers and you feel his agony in your bones. “I could change like a fish could.”

Your chest feels tight your eyes burn. Can you stop now? You want to stop.

There’s a faint blush to the 18 year olds cheeks but the story continues.
“There are many different ways of packing but at 16, with limited resources, I tried the sock method. Essentially you take a pair of socks, ball them up to a certain shape and put them in your pants. It’s about as uncomfortable and silly to do as it sounds. But at 16 it was a shard of light and me reaching out to grasp it. For about half a day I went through my normal routine, the only difference being the bulge in my pants. It felt ridiculous and after a while I forgot why I was even doing it. Once and only once have I packed, and it’s because I only needed to once to know a pair of socks weren’t going to make me change.”

Do you remember the blink of light? You can’t anymore can you? Was it even there?

The spot light shifts to another version of me. She sits in the same chair, between 18 and almost 19. Posture sunken she looks somewhere past you and her eyes look blood shot. You hear him stop pacing and tense behind you.

Everything feels big or are you just small? Too small you’re too small.

“Emily and I lay on my bed, her head on my chest and my arm around her. I mentioned feeling male that day, she grumbled something about having figured that out. I joked about packing, made to get up and grab a pair of socks. She tightened her arm on my waist and made an exaggerated plea of denial. We had gone back and forth like this before and I thought nothing of it. The relationship has ended and now my insides curl in on themselves at the memory.”

You’re face feels dirty, you want to scratch it.

“She though it would make me male. She thought it would change me but it wouldn’t.”

He makes an angry sound, like a growl torn into shreds by a shout. Hands on the shoulders of your chair he yells at the screen.
“Too pretty to be a boy. Too girlish to be a man.

Too slight

Too small

Too fragile

Not strong enough

Hair too long

Nails not right

Too long

Hips too wide

Scrawny

You scrawny girl

Too pretty

You’re too pretty”

Stop stop breathe too tight breathe

The screen is blank black and he is leaning so close the heat against your face and neck becomes overbearing. He is practically hissing in your ear.

“It’s like claws behind my cheeks. It’s fire burning at my eyes. It this tight too tight too tight to breath feeling I can’t stop it it won’t stop. It can’t. Dysphoria is not uneasiness, it is not dissatisfaction. It is pain it’s pain it is unquestionable pain and darkness that you can’t fight because it’s locked up so solid so dark so tight inside for so long that you can’t tell if you’d be better off with or without it anymore. Could you breathe without the pressure always heavy on your chest? What if you can’t what if you can’t what if. You cannot have euphoria it’s light not
solid and the gray haze is a temporary sedation another in-between until you’re red eyed staring at a mirror wanting to scream “I’m me” because you know you are

“I am me I want to be myself.”

And you will scream it even while liquid darkness drags you down but no one else seems to see you.

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I wanted to immerse you in me. There are versions of myself that say key things but they’re ignorant of what I know now. You that sits and watches is just as much myself as the person writing this. You are me and you will struggle with these feelings of not right no not right. You don’t want to feel it and neither do I.

You will cry your eyes blood shot and scream your voice hoarse from things you don’t understand. You will breathe in the gray haze simply because it will not drown you like the waters of dysphoria.

Deep in the oceans there are places that the suns light has never touched: they are dark only from eternal absents of light.

You are not from these depths but rather from a shallow sea where lights warmth knows you well but waters cold darkness surrounds you.

Do not be fooled and dragged into the water. You are no fish.