

preliminary thoughts toward a theory of normalized pain  
or  
the gender of wellness

*one—waxing crescent.*

2006: found blood after a mountain bike ride. buried panties in the bottom of the trash can and didn't say anything.

july 4, 2008: doubled over in pain at the annual family cookout. first spot of blood that night.

2009: my mother refused to buy me tampons. embarrassed by pads, spent \$0.50 on a tampon in the grocery store bathroom. too big, pinched, didn't know how to use it.

2010: it was just that it was normal for getting fingered to hurt.

august 2011: *AB* inside of me on artificial turf under a meteor shower. splitting in two, tearing up, will never be whole. after: "you're always so quiet after we fool around."

september 2013: *maybe this is just how it is maybe you will learn to like it maybe it's like coffee maybe sex is an acquired taste maybe you should keep your mouth shut so he comes faster and you can take an advil and fall asleep.*

december 2013: white, male, mormon gynecologist. "if you were in a monogamous relationship you wouldn't have to worry about birth control. your boyfriend knows you're getting an iud, right?" splitting in two, tearing up, will never be whole. after: a parking ticket on the windshield.

january 2014: cramps, debilitating, coming with the measured regularity of each new moon. curled up and moaning. splitting in two, tearing up, will never be whole.

august 2015: sex that is tender. still hurts. come anyway.

october 2015: "fuck off."

january 2016: sex, twice, then again, fourth time, not in love, uti turns into a kidney infection.

unable to move, breathe, eat, speak, six days finally it passes. this is atonement, must be, maybe original sin isn't bullshit after all.

july 2016: sharp stabbing mind-numbing pain. go upstairs at work. smoke a joint. go home, eyesight fractured with white flashes. iud has dislodged.

august 2016: eyes filling with tears maybe stop moving maybe stop breathing maybe breathe deeper maybe give up.

september 2016: removal of dislodged iud. the following cycle is throwing up in the library cursing body parts.

october 2016: "return to planned parenthood of southern new england no later than october of 2028 to remove the paragard."

*two.*

"The normal body, the default body, the body that every body is assumed to be, is a body not bleeding from the vagina. Thus to *be* normal and to be taken as normal, the menstruating woman must not speak about her bleeding and must conceal evidence of it."

iris young  
on female body experience

*three.*

I wish them cramps  
I wish them a strange town  
and the last tampon.  
I wish them no 7-11.

I wish them one week early  
and wearing a white skirt.  
I wish them one week late.

later I wish them hot flashes  
and clots like you  
wouldn't believe. let the  
flashes come when they  
meet someone special.  
let the clots come  
when they want to.

let them think they have accepted  
arrogance in the unpreliminary thoughts toward a theory of normalized pain  
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let them think they have accepted  
arrogance in the universe,  
then bring them to gynecologists  
not unlike themselves.

lucille clifton

*four.*

“It will hurt so much that you’ll wonder if he’s putting it in the wrong hole. It will hurt so much that it will feel like he’s stabbing you in the vagina. It will hurt so much that you’ll stop long before he gets close to coming. And that’s how you’re going to lose your virginity.”

chloe angyl

*five.*

“If men could menstruate [...] Of course, intellectuals would offer the most moral and logical arguments. Without the biological gift for measuring the cycles of the moon and planets, how could a woman master any discipline that demanded a sense of time, space, mathematics-- or the ability to measure anything at all? In philosophy and religion, how could women compensate for being disconnected from the rhythm of the universe? Or for their lack of symbolic death and resurrection every month?”

gloria steinem

if men could menstruate

*six.*

used to be that hysteria was thought to be a consequence of the womb wandering through the body. it had to be grounded via techniques of the strategic placement of odors to lure it back to where it belonged.

*seven.*

the theorists I usually turn to for comfort are strangely silent on the topic of menstruation. or, they speak of the shame of menstruation, the taboo, the socialized necessity to hide the signs and the symptoms. but they do not mention the pain. the other things interest me. but I am most concerned with what decades of regular, expected, normalized pain *does*. how does menstruation (and its correlate of pain) inform resilience, hope[ful][less][ness], joy, fear, expectations? that is to say, if an existence is characterized by periodic (they are, after all, called periods) instances of perforation and intense physical pain to the extent that the pain becomes normalized, integrated into daily life, how has the nature of that existence formed around itself in the image of that pain?

*eight—waxing gibbous.*

it is not too large a jump, then, to claim that normalized pain in people who menstruate may cause them to be less likely to report on and receive treatment for serious medical issues. when pain is normalized, the assumption is that, soon enough, it will stop.

*nine.*

“The main take-away seems to be that younger women may “ignore” or “dismiss” their symptoms [of a heart attack] and “hesitate” or “delay” in seeking care, in part out of anxiety about raising a false alarm.”

maya dusenbery

*ten.*

“The presence of stress, the researchers explained, sparked a “meaning shift” in which women’s physical symptoms were reinterpreted as psychological, while “men’s symptoms were perceived as organic whether or not stressors were present.””

maya dusenbery

*eleven.*

he said it’s a storm  
it’s a storm I thought  
am I allowed  
to ask entire questions  
to take this space  
alone

eileen myles

*full moon*

*twelve.*

“The man on top of you is telling you how good sex feels.”

chloe angyl

*thirteen.*

in 2012 a team of researchers at Stanford found that women tend to feel pain more intensely than men. and yet, women continue to have babies.

*fourteen.*

menstruation brings with it physical limitations. perhaps a reason that menstruation is so deeply shamed and shameful is that it reminds women, monthly, that we are subjugated. it is a justification for second-class citizenship. after all, once-monthly incapacitation must have something to do with inferiority.

*fifteen—waning crescent.*

we had a virginity bet. six of us. whoever lost it first got to slap the others.

*sixteen.*

“Feminist struggles to open public spaces and opportunities to women and to disengage the personhood of women from their biology contributed to a changing view of menstruation that regards it as a normal and incidental process that is not debilitating.”

iris young  
on female body experience

*seventeen.*

“Women experience more pain in general – they go to the doctor with pain-related issues more often than men, they take more painkillers, and suffer from more painful ailments, such as lower back pain and migraines.”

lit review university of miami 2009

*eighteen.*

“Acknowledging the toll that our periods can take – and adjusting our lives accordingly – can feel like a feminist failure.”

ann friedman

*nineteen.*

women are twice as likely to receive a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder than men. men believe, in general, that women exaggerate their menstrual pain.

*twenty.*

if there is a river  
more beautiful than this  
bright as the blood  
red edge of the moon            if

there is a river  
more faithful than this  
returning each month  
to the same delta            if there

is a river  
braver than this  
coming and coming in a surge  
of passion, of pain            if there is

a river  
more ancient than this  
daughter of eve  
mother of cain and of abel if there is in

the universe such a river if  
there is some where water  
more powerful than this wild  
water  
pray that it flows also  
through animals  
beautiful and faithful and ancient  
and female and brave

lucille clifton

*twenty-one.*  
the world is not built for me.

*twenty-two—waning crescent.*  
mental health has a gender. the gender is male. emotional stability has a gender. the gender is male. norms of healthy and sick are derived from a male neutrality against which women must make evaluative decisions regarding their own minds and emotions. there is an evolutionary advantage for women to have fluctuating cyclical brain chemicals that ebb and flow with the moon and with the hormones that thicken and thin the uterine wall. these fluctuations are incompatible with the norms of health that have emerged from standards of emotional stability gendered male. pathologization of biological difference and yet what is the biological difference and resting on biology perhaps makes me a bad feminist.

*twenty-three.*  
women do not have merely one set of lips.

*twenty-four.*  
sucking is dangerous. the danger of sucking.

gertrude stein

*twenty-five.*  
wellness is conflated with stability. men operate in a state of static hormones. women do not. by this measure, women are never well, perhaps always hysteric. the internet is full of brightly colored diagrams depicting the changing levels of progesterone, estrogen, luteinizing hormone, follicle-stimulating hormone. all of this occurring in the contained and uncontainable world of

my own reproductive organs and the reproductive organs of ½ of the population of the world. and yet. stable and well are not the same, and well is not the same thing as male, although that is what we are taught. maleness as neutral. anxious men called feminine, anxious women called hysteric. and always there are the witches.

*twenty-six.*

“Asymptomatic. Causing one thing to fuck another. Introducing between one thing and another one of those copula which is an and. Genitals are for togetherness. Put her two feet in the stirrups.”

ariana reines  
the cow

*twenty-seven.*

I find a certain comfort sometimes in the following experience: I have three days of relatively intense psychic pain, feeling that all my life decisions have brought me to some implausibly bad place, and that at every turn I should have done something else, etc., etc. I usually take this out on my thinking about my career and my thinking about my partner, and sometimes my general thinking about the people around me, such that I start to see the world as filled with people who inexplicably find me awful, and then I fill in all the explanations I can muster that all too quickly remove the “inexplicably” from the sentence. Then I get atrocious cramps, and have the extraordinary feeling of *relief* that my life actually isn’t terrible, I was just having a surge of hormones and emotions resulting. I lie around in extreme pain feeling great because my feelings weren’t as reliable as they seemed at the time, it really was just this usual, ordinary, normal pain, and I don’t need to listen to those feelings in my life. I do have to sustain three or four days of feeling atrocious, *but it’s just the physical atrocity*, I find myself thinking, *nothing I have to do anything about.*

anna bialek

*twenty-eight.*

what, then, does this normalized pain do for and to the menstruator? this relationship of expected perforation, of ebbing and flowing of psychic and physical pain, the mandala, centered and centering and decentering and pervasive and always, always, *returning*. this pain that breaks open, physically, leaving one shinier than before, this quotidian pain that is far from exceptional. this pain that constitutes woman, woman she is constituted by and against her pain, and relief is always and necessarily short-lived.