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2020

## Read Our Lips

Darby Murnane  
*University of Maine at Farmington*

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Darby Murnane

HON 499 Creative Project

Read Our Lips

## Artist Statement

I wanted a focus on representation. As I began to write and think through the shape of the show, I had an urge to reread Camille Dungy's *Guidebook to Relative Strangers* in which Dungy discussed the burden thrust upon her of representing all black women when she was the only black woman at the table during a writer's retreat. There was an expectation from the other writers that she would explain and speak for black women in general during a conversation about portrayals of race in media.

All of us in the cast have at one point or another, whether in class, at home, or among friends, been expected to represent the demographic in which we fall. And I did not want to force this burden on my performers. So it was vital to my vision of the performance that we each write our monologues ourselves. We would not represent anyone but ourselves by telling our own personal true stories. This was one small way that this show diverged from Ensler's monologues in that we did not perform as characters telling stories that belonged to someone else. While Ensler's do not lack in their power and deeply touch on specific experiences that so many people share, it is easier as a listener to build a comfortable wall between the story you hear and the harsh reality of it when the monologue is performed in character. I decided that we hold copies of our monologues on stage as another way of reminding the audience that the stories they heard had happened to the people in front of them.

And as a journalist, I wanted to express a range of experiences that I felt did not get enough attention. This started with my own medical journey over the past year as I encountered diagnoses I had never heard of before, a lack of treatment options due to a lack of research on the female reproductive system, and gender bias and abuse in the healthcare system. But as the cast

came together I wanted to broaden the scope of material the show would cover by touching on sexualities that often get erased like asexuality and pansexuality, the fluidity of the non-gender conforming experience, and where overlaps existed between the queer and cis-gendered experience when bodies assigned female at birth seek physical autonomy and change.

## Read Our Lips: A Staged Reading of Student Written Monologues about Vaginas

Authors: Darby Murnane, Aiden Saulnier, Caitlin Hession, Eila McCulloch, Aurora Bartley, Samantha Wood. Ensemble pieces co-written by the entire cast.

Director: Darby Murnane

Assistant Directors: Mary Ellms, Gavin Pickering

Cast:

Darby Murnane  
Aiden (AJ) Saulnier  
Caitlin Hession  
Eila McCulloch  
Allex Read  
Samantha Wood

Director's Note:

The cast of *Read Our Lips* originally included UMF alumna, Aurora Bartley, who also performed in previous student productions of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Due to sudden personal circumstances, Aurora was unable to perform. But to honor the time she spent in the cast, the contributions she made to pulling the show together, and editing monologues as they were written, her piece, "The Lost Child" is included in this script.

Filling in to cover her absence in group monologues were UMF students Eila McCulloch, another performer in previous student productions of *The Vagina Monologues*, and Allex Read. Eila also generously contributed another monologue of her own to the performance, "Trial of Woman."

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## Vagina Shower Thoughts

**Darby:** We don't talk enough about vaginas. They're taboo things to us.

**AJ:** Yeah, we don't talk about yeast infections, discharge, or masturbating.

**Caitlin:** When we do talk about them, we go a little overkill on vaginas being inherently beautiful, sexual forces.

**Sam:** Because too often we conflate empowerment with sexuality and beauty.

**AJ:** For some people, these things are empowering.

**Sam:** But not for everyone.

**Allex:** There's a darker side to vagina ownership than most would care to admit.

**AJ:** Because if we admit the problems, the times we don't love our vaginas, people tell us we're body-shaming ourselves, how could we hate ourselves like that?

**Darby:** But our stories, our vaginas, are more than some magical sexual awakening.

**Eila:** They're more than being pretty.

**Sam:** Our stories and our vaginas are as expansive and profound as everything else about and within ourselves.

### PAUSE

**Caitlin:** My vagina is at war with my sexuality. Even though the battles are being fought within myself, I cannot honestly tell you who is winning.

**Darby:** I've been told gay people are a genetic dead end. I don't have the heart to tell the people who say this that I might be a dead end too and my vagina has nailed a "no trespassing" sign on it's doors.

**Sam:** I've been weirdly emotional lately. My period was last week, what are you doing vagina?

**AJ:** I used to be comfortable with my vagina. What changed?

**Darby:** I was almost comfortable, almost unafraid and free to explore. Until a diagnosis changed everything.

**Caitlin:** I have friends who desire sex yet can't physically have it. I can physically have sex but don't desire it. Why can't we trade vaginas? It would make life so much easier.

**Darby:** Yeah, it would. But vaginas have never been free to desire, have they?

**Caitlin:** Someone really wants to put their *mouth? Down there?*

**AJ:** Clearly, no one thought about the smell. . .

**Alex:** The first time I heard labia referred to as lips, I whispered to a friend, “What if it talked?” But the more I’ve considered the joke, the more I cringe at the imagined dialogue.

**Sam:** When people talk about vaginas, they often compare them to flowers. I see them more as an alien fleshy pink mass- gross and vaguely toxic.

**AJ:** But I kinda liked the flower metaphor.

**Darby:** I don’t know, it always kinda reminded me of lettuce.

**Eila:** Honestly, a dick would be so much easier. At least I would know for sure when I came.

**Sam:** And then I too could finally spread my legs to let my bits breathe a little.

**Alex:** We seriously need to stop referring to a person’s first period as flowering. It’s not a flower. It’s a shackle.

**AJ:** And we need to stop calling it, “becoming a woman.” I wasn’t even 13 when I got my first period- I was not a woman, I was barely more than a child.

**Eila:** There has to be another form of empowerment than a simple insistence that vaginas must be beautiful.

**Darby:** Because sometimes they’re brutal things.

**Said together:** I am more than my vagina.

**Eila:** There is more that I find beautiful about myself than my vagina.

**Caitlin:** Yet, it doesn’t have to constrain me.

**Darby:** I am allowed to want in spite of what my vagina can and cannot do for me.

**AJ:** I can still love myself in spite of what my vagina can and can’t do.

**Sam:** I can still be empowered.

**Caitlin:** I am not broken for my lack of love for my vagina.

## An Asexual's Relationship with their Vagina

Caitlin Hession

So we're going to go on a little trip down memory lane. I want you to think of the first time you had sex, whether that was decades, years, months, or even weeks ago. I want you to think about the person, about the feelings, about the actual act itself. What was going through your head? What, specifically, were you doing? When did you first feel that fire inside and decide to act on it? Really think about that. Think about when you decided, yes, I am going to have sex.

Now I want you to think about something possibly outside your experiences. I want you to think about someone, a child really, who looks around herself and sees all these people burning up inside, desperate for a physical connection, craving something more than themselves, imagining a future child... and yet, she doesn't feel any of that. She doesn't feel the fire, the intense passion that disregards everything in its path. How isolating must that experience be? Not being able to connect with anyone, confide in anyone that no, I don't want sex, sex is gross, sex is *scary*. And beyond all that, I just don't want it.

That was my experience. And this is what I want to talk to you about.

Growing up, I wasn't really interested in relationships. Sure, I found people cute, but that's usually as far as my attraction went. When I hit high school, I didn't get that burning fire of passion or get immediately horny whenever someone looked at me. I just kinda existed. Mom called me mature for not wanting to jump into any relationships or sex. I called myself self-aware because I had big plans and sticking around my tiny hometown for a significant other wasn't part of them. I figured my lack of wanting sex was normal until I got to college. This is

when I saw people dying to get laid and constantly needing to be in a relationship and having sex. Coincidentally, this is also when my ex boyfriend of two years asked me why we never had sex. Easy question right? Wrong. I started to question everything I knew about myself - my plans for the future, my limited number of previous relationships, and most importantly, my sexuality. This is when I really started looking around myself and noticing how different I was. My friends all wanted sex, and here I was, perfectly content in my little bubble without it. I started to wonder, is it because I find vaginas and dicks honestly rather gross? Is it because I don't want people seeing me naked? Or am I just scared? Really truly scared of that intimacy that so naturally comes with sex? Am I... Am I broken?

After about 3 months of soul searching and google searching, I realized that no, I am not broken. I am a part of the asexual spectrum, demisexual if we want to be exact. This means that I do not desire sex unless I have a strong emotional connection with the person. And no, that does not mean that I am "normal" or "not a whore." I literally can't "get it up" as some people say unless I have an emotional, or romantic, connection. It's just how I am.

So what does all of this have to do with my vagina? Honestly, everything. I have a vagina, but other than having one, I don't really know what purpose it has. All it seems to really do is cause me pain once a month and vaguely exists for the rest of the time. And I've never been particularly attached to it either. As many guys will tell you, vaginas are very confusing. I don't even know whether everything is a-okay down there or if things are going disastrously wrong! Vaginas, as a general whole, are a mystery to me. And it's not like school has helped me any. Growing up, in the dreaded sex ed class where teenagers are basically taught not to have sex or the devil will come and steal you away, everyone is taught that vaginas have one primary

purpose: babies. Babies and “the continuation of the species” is why we, as mammals, have vaginas. And to have babies, one needs to have sex. Some of you may be seeing my conundrum. For the most part, I don’t desire sex. I *definitely* don’t desire babies. So what use is my vagina? It’s just kinda taking up prime real estate where other, more useful organs could live. So what use is my vagina?

This isn’t a monologue where I have any answers or come to any grand realizations that my vagina was beautiful the whole time. I had hoped to understand a little bit more about myself and my vagina when I started this, but I’m just as confused at the end as I was at the beginning. So here is what I know. My name is Caitlin. I am a part of the asexual spectrum. I have a vagina, but I don’t use it or want to use it for its intended purposes. Maybe someday I’ll figure out a use for my vagina, but for right now, I guess my vagina and I are just going to live like my first roommate in college and I did: friendly, but not close. Aware of each other, living together, but ultimately, with no relationship.

## The Lost Child

Aurora Bartley

My boyfriend and I are unconventional people. Him more than I but on our first date I remember telling him “I don’t want a boring life. I want adventure.”

We came together as a sort of whirlwind and I’m literally so fucking happy. I could list all of the amazing things about him and our relationship. I could also blurt out in word vomit all of the things about his past that made my parents have a brain aneurysm when I first told them, which I soon realized was a mistake.

As my parents either became more or less worried about me, I kept falling in love, and I mean hard, head-over-heels *in love* with this person who had entered my life a mere month and a half ago. Never is there a doubt in my mind about our love ....

We found out I was pregnant in early October. I was 22 and we wanted this baby, even though it was a surprise.... A few weeks after I had taken a pregnancy test I had just begun to get used to the idea. I started looking up ethically made baby clothes on Etsy. Andrew had bought a tie dye kit and a pack of white newborn onesies for us to color together.

After moving into the tiny house with Andrew I drove south to visit my family for Thanksgiving. On the second morning of waking up at my mom’s house I remember getting my cup of coffee and joining mom and Gary at the table before breakfast. They were both oddly

quiet and then they began asking me questions, reminding me things about Andrew that I already knew. In recent months I had grown the stones to just let my parents talk at me with whatever concerns or worries they wanted.

“Are you sure you want this baby?”

“Are you sure you want this baby with *him*?”

“Was there any indication, any little voice in your head that said maybe this was a bad idea?”

Yes, I want this baby.

Yes, I’m sure I want it with him.

No, there is no voice telling me this is a bad idea. I wanted to tell them all to “fuck off and let me live my goddamn life and stop making me cry for fuck’s sake!”

Growing up, my mom would tell me that everyone deserves to love and be loved. Her criticizing my relationship made me regret telling her everything, like I used to when I was growing up. It felt like heartbreak.

Throughout the pregnancy so far I had experienced cramping similar to menstrual cramps. I had also undergone severe amounts of stress and anguish. There were days when I called out of work because I couldn’t stop crying. There were days when I couldn’t cook for myself. All I wanted was to be close to Andrew, in his arms.

As my parents came to terms with my pregnancy, they became more supportive. Except for my mom’s husband, Gary. He probably doesn’t give a shit. My first morning home for Thanksgiving, I asked him:

“So, Gary, are you ready to be a step-grandpa?”

“Are you?” Was all he said. What kind of a passive aggressive fucking low ball response is that? He can totally forget about having a relationship with me.

During my visit at home I had my first prenatal appointment. The doctor told me that I was 14 weeks. She told me the foods I should avoid and that yes, I was allowed 8 oz of coffee a day.

I remember the cramps began that night. I helped mom cook dinner but ate it alone in the second tv room. I tend to isolate myself when things are weird at home. It feels easier that way. The cramps were considerably bad, getting worse over time and lasted until I went to sleep. A little cause for concern but I brushed it off even though the pain was the most intense I’d ever felt. It was a pain deep down in my abdomen and shooting pains from side to side. I was taking prenatal vitamins everyday and I wasn’t bleeding. I knew that some cramping and bleeding was normal, especially during implantation of the embryo into the uterine wall. So I told myself I was fine.

The next morning I woke up still with light cramping. I remember I went to go pee and there was blood. Bright red. Not a lot but enough for me to tell my mom quietly as she was getting ready to leave for work. I felt myself tremble inside as I thought of what this could mean. She tells me I should call my doctor.

So I lay low and try to eat and not worry. The cramps were worse now and I was still bleeding... My mom came home from work. We had lunch and then she drove me to a women’s clinic in Springfield.

I'm uncomfortable. I'm in pain. I'm scared. I don't know what to think. I don't know how to tell my mom this. She's right there but I can't let her in. She's right fucking there, and I keep wishing it was Andrew and not her by my side. I feel guilty for wishing that.

First, they can't find the heartbeat of my baby. Then a friendly, young doctor comes in, feels my uterus, and tells me it may be too early to detect a heartbeat.

I get changed into a hospital gown and they do an ultrasound. There is a team of 3 women in the room with my mom and I. Two doctors and a med student— who is probably my age, stare at the monitor. They press hard into my abdomen with the ultrasound probe. My mom is standing right next to me. They can't see the baby.

“Let's try the transvaginal probe.” I hear the younger doctor say. It's the size of a fat tampon. They put this thing in my vagina. After much moving around, they finally see the fetus, my baby. I crane my neck up and sideways to see it on the ultrasound monitor. It's so small and it's at the bottom of the screen and not moving. There's a bulbous part at one end- that must be where the brain and head develops. I see dots and lines inside the figure of the fetus on the screen. A small spinal column, stretching from top to bottom.

They tell me it looks like my body is having a miscarriage.

I remember thinking “it's over. My baby is dead. There is a dead baby inside of me, rotting.”

And I tell them “Get it out of me. Please get it out of me now.”

They paused and told me that I had 3 options. 1) Go home and wait for my body to pass it. 2) Take a pill that induces my body to pass it. 3) Have a D&C. Dilation and curettage. When the tissue and all contents inside the uterus are removed. I pick option 3. The option with the

least risk of infection. One and done. They can fit me in the next day. I call Andrew on the phone and tell him what's going on. We cry together. That was the only time I cried that day. It was maybe a month or more before I cried again. It would be even longer until we cried in each other's arms over the loss of our child.

The day of the procedure, my mom was by my side. She was by my side the days after during my recovery. She came to visit me in Maine a month after the procedure. I told her I was sorry that I wasn't able to let her in when she was there for me during the miscarriage. I told her that I had dreamt about my baby a few nights before. She told me that it's okay, that she understands, and that she loves me. I let go of the guilt and let her love in.

Arriving back up at our tiny house after what felt like the longest three weeks of my life, was actually only a week and a half. That first night back in Maine, Andrew and I went for a walk to the ocean. And then the biggest, brightest shooting star went all the way across the sky. We both watched it soar before us, above the still cold water. Thousands of miles away. A bright yellow trail followed the white light of the shooting star.

“Our baby.” said Andrew.

## Womanhood: Terms and Conditions Apply

Darby Murnane

I don't think of my uterus as something that makes me a woman. I never have. I don't even think of it as my "womb." It's just my uterus- the thing that bleeds, the thing that hurts. Though it is hard to escape the overbearing cultural significance put on uteri. When you get your first period, you're told you've become a woman, that your body's ready to have a baby, even if you're only ten years old. All my teachers, friends, friends' mothers, and my mother too to some extent, impressed me with this idea. And I wanted no part of it. The idea that some uncontrollable, bloody happenstance in my uterus, that simply being fertile was what launched me into womanhood scared the hell out of me. I didn't feel like a woman when I got my first period at 14, and I didn't want to feel like a woman either. I wanted to feel like a 14 year old. And for a long time, I hated my uterus, wouldn't even say the word and struck down an irreparable separation between my uterus and my gender.

But, despite all of this, I do think of my uterus as part of me. So much of my life since I was 14 has been shaped by everything wrong with my uterus: the pain it causes me, the amount of time spent doctors offices telling them about passing out from that pain, the ridiculous amounts of hormones introduced into my system after having to try four different birth controls, going through chemically induced menopause this summer and recovering from what it did to me. My uterus is so present, it exists so loudly that even if it doesn't shape my feelings about my gender, it still shapes some of who I am by what it does to me.

And now I'm trying to get a hysterectomy. The doctors think I have something called adenomyosis and the only way to definitively diagnose it is by removing my uterus to examine

it. Adenomyosis is similar to endometriosis, where the cells of the uterine lining that's shed during the menstrual cycle grow where they're not supposed to, like on the outside of the uterus or on the ovaries, or even on other organs in the abdominal cavity. In my case, with adenomyosis, those cells might have implanted inside the muscle wall of my uterus, creating glandular pockets that make the organ softer than it should be.

I'm in pain everyday now and nothing helps. The only cure that's been made known to me is the hysterectomy. So that's what I'm fighting for. And as much as I want it, as much as I am ready to go on the fucking black market to have my uterus taken out, I know there will be a grieving process. Because it has been such a loud and ever present part of my body, once it is gone, there will be an absence. And I don't know what will fill that absence.

But I never worried about it impacting my feelings about my femininity. I never worried about the people in my life thinking of me as less of a woman. Until the feminine hygiene product company Always announced last October they would be taking the Venus symbol, the women's empowerment symbol, off their packaging to accommodate trans and nonbinary customers. And people on the internet lost their fucking minds.

It's an ungodly attack, or so I hear, not to have the Venus symbol on pad and tampon wrappers to remind a lady of her undeniable womanhood, you know as she's bleeding in the bathroom and probably out for more blood once someone irritates her enough. It's really misogynistic, apparently, not to let her bleed all over her feminine flag. The wrapper might be going in the trash in two seconds, but I hear you can't call yourself feminist unless your garbage is empowered too.

You might be a little confused about how this relates to my potential hysterectomy. Honestly, I wouldn't have thought anything of the Always dilemma either. But then a few people close to me, who know exactly what's going on with my health, shared this post on Facebook:

“Why can't natural born women have feelings about this and not be attacked? Why is everything about our sex being erased to accommodate everyone else but us who were born women and choose to love being a woman? Fact of the matter is we really are women, it's not a feeling but a scientific fact and we have the right to want to hold on to that.”

A scientific fact, huh? Is having a uterus part of that scientific fact? Despite the problems and inconsistencies with the newest wave feminism, I thought women could at least agree that we're more than our wombs and vaginas. But I guess not. I guess some women have gone back to ye old days when women were just defined by our reproductive anatomy. So if she bleeds, she's a woman. If she doesn't, she's a witch.

So what will I be then, if I get the hysterectomy? If to these Twitter and Facebook banshees, gender can only be determined by biological binaries, what happens to people like me, whose bodies don't work right and are missing some essential parts? Am I just some purgatory monster then? More importantly, if biological binaries are the only option here, without a uterus would I get to become a cis white man- like with all the same cis white man privileges?

I mean think of the possibilities! If losing my uterus is all it takes to shuck off this melancholy burden of womanhood, imagine what I can do in the world. Gone are the days of groping hands smacking my ass without permission because now any ass slap will only be a preface to a heartfelt, “Good game.” My tits will only be touched in meaty, touchdown chest bumps. Saturday will be for me. And so long wage gap, if any employer tries to short my

paycheck I'll have to show the hysterectomy scars and say, "Aha, good sir! You've been bamboozled, for I am a woman no more! Behold my empty pelvis."

I think I'll be a rugged sort of man- you know, the axe-swinging, plaid and suspender wearing type that flounces about- I mean, *steps boldly* about the forest and maybe even lives in a log cabin. The real hair-on-his-chest type that drinks from steins and thinks about . . . motors and things.

This feels right because I haven't been feeling the most feminine lately anyway. I haven't felt pretty or ladylike while hunched over with cramps all the time and being too uncomfortable to expand my wardrobe past sweatpants. And forget about shaving; my interest in keeping my skin "touchably smooth" has severely diminished now that the only hands touching me are gloved ones in the doctor's office. Nor has the hormone acne blooming across my skin encouraged me to show the world how womanly my body may be. And oh god, *it's on my back now*. I didn't have acne like this in high school but apparently when you go through puberty part two the electric fucking boobaloo, you get all sorts of fun bonuses. I swear, any more oil on my face and the U.S. might start another military occupation for drilling rights.

In case you couldn't tell, I've been grumpy and aggressive lately, impatient and disinterested with regaining feelings of femininity. Honestly, I haven't given a fuck about the "natural beauty" and "magic" of my "womanly parts" when everything just hurts. So I guess in internet logic, my transformation has already begun.

But sure, let's hold tight to the Venus symbol and fly that lady flag on a piece of fucking plastic wrapping to remind everyone that a vagina, uterus, and ovaries are women's special treasures. So special, in fact, that we might forget about them if we don't have the right fun

shapes to look at while changing our pads in the bathroom, we might even forget why we're in there. And Jesus Christ, what if without the Venus symbol our uteri forget where they're supposed to be and fall right out? Women might even get lost in the grocery store- who the hell thought our period brains could handle words?

But when some of us aren't feeling too friendly towards our vaginas or uteri anymore, we don't get to escape constant reminders of their presence and how much they hurt us in one way or another. We are locked in or cast out of an unforgivable paradigm based on the accident of genetics. So here starts my journey into no man's land- or I guess no woman's land, since I suppose they won't have me without my uterus.

## What Really Gets Me

Aiden Saulnier

You know what really gets me:

--People asking what parts I have.

--My vagina, my labia, my ovaries, my cervix, my clit. MY CLIT-- God is that what you wanted to hear? My Clit?

--Sometimes I call it my penis, because it empowers me.

But you know what really gets me, is

-- hating myself because I will never be able to use it to penetrate a lover.

--a family friend telling me that she would never see me as a man unless I had a penis

--internalizing but actively trying to refute the idea that trans people have to transition to be valid

-- being asked if I'm taking hormones

--Feeling hypocritical for taking hormones

-- the burning itching rashes I get from taking hormones

-- wearing testosterone patches and accidentally scratching my skin off thereby adding another scar to my body.

-- the idea of passing as a trans person...

You know what really got me?

--girls in high school saying I needed to wear bras because my nipples were too noticeable, or what... distracting? I'm sorry, really-- I seen you skipping class to make out with boys in the hall- but sure, my body is what's going to reduce the quality of your education.

You know what really gets me?

--wearing chest binders for far too long and experiencing chronic rib and chest pain.

--Wearing chest binders to the beach to go swimming and getting major nipple chafe.

-- going to the beach with my top off and feeling like I have to hide my chest even though I'm technically protected by law.

--being too ashamed to wear the things that accentuate my body anymore. Like dresses..

GOD, I love pretty, frilly, "girly" things. I LOVE dresses. I love feeling beautiful, and yet.. The fear that none of you will take me seriously has forced me to stuff that part of myself deep down.

It gets me

--staring at my naked body, and hairless face in the mirror for hours, wondering why things won't change faster.

--not knowing how to define my gender, sexual orientation or sexuality.

-- my dad telling me you're a man now so you have to man up

--never feeling as real as the other trans men I know

-- The fact that I'm not even really a trans man. But that does not make me a woman by default. I am a queer person, plain and simple. It's hard to be more specific than that. But the beauty is that I don't have to be.

You know what really gets me

--society erasing intersex experience

You know what really gets me?

--my mom telling me you can't change your sex over and over again.

You know what really gets me

--yet the fact that all babies start without sex, that hormones and sex characteristics begin to form in very late stage fetal growth. That some babies are born with sex parts that are different from their hormones, and vice versa.

--Yet hospitals will trim the clits of females sexed at birth, just because they look too long.

It also gets me when I'm

--talking about raising children with my partner who talks about having boys and girls when I'm not interested in forcing gender on infants

You know what really gets me?

--being trans and feminine and dealing with all the same sexism a woman receives as well as receiving queerphobia, people thinking you're a lesbian and bashing that, and having to come out over and over again every day.

But you know what really gets me?-- and this actually gets me really good.

--Loving women with vaginas

--Loving women without vaginas

--Loving men with vaginas

--Loving men without vaginas (almost as much)

--Loving intersex people and nonbinary people and not caring what I'll find underneath their skirt, or joggers, or running shorts, or khakis.

It gets me

--Figuring out the dating scene.

It got me

--holding hands with that one guy in the park before going out for pizza with him and then asking him if he dated guys very often. Having him tell me this wasn't a date. Asking him to kiss

me and him saying that all he would be able to see was a girl and that he couldn't do that to me.. that he respected me because he has a trans brother but that he just wasn't gay.. still not being able to tell if he was being considerate or just transphobic

You know what really gets me?

--Cis gay men not wanting to fuck girls that think they are boys. Knowing they're allowed to have their preferences, but feeling hurt because at the end of the day, because after all, a hole is a hole. *Am I right guys?*

You know what really gets me?

--my own partner telling me I'm too queer, too flamboyant, my identity is too much about attention seeking. Lover, this is my identity. I own it. It is mine to do with it what I wish.

You know what really gets me?

-- the woman I love never being able to feel like a real woman because her 'vagina' has a different shape.  
--Her hating being called a 'trans' woman because she is just a woman but somehow less because of what hangs between her legs??  
--going literally anywhere with her and having people say "how are we doing today, ladies?"  
--that guy who called me a country girl a few days ago just because I was wearing camouflage pants.  
--constantly asking myself, seriously what is with all this unnecessarily gendered language?

You know what really got me, was

--Crying that time in middle school when a woman in the parking lot of my moms old job saw us horsing around and said "I can take him home if he's causing you too much trouble"  
-- or that boy in middle school who told me I wasn't a real girl because I cut all my hair off.. well...  
\* it turns out they were both right, and yet I still lowkey hope he chokes.\*

It really got me

--that day several years ago when that little girl asked if I was a boy or a girl and I said I'm whatever I want to be and you can be too  
--But then on that same day when my little cousin asked "what is he doing" and my aunt immediately said "it's she sweetie"

Then fast forwarding to this Summer

--when I went to my aunt's wedding. I wore my masc mask and refused to let on that I was the same person as my aunt's niece, even when her best friend came up to me "Hey aren't you--", "No! I'm Aiden."

-- And there was my little cousin all the while asking "you're a boy right?"

It really gets me

--being told that I made the right decision by telling my little cousin yes, I am a boy rather than.. actually no I'm not really a boy or a girl.. I'm just your cousin and friend and most importantly a human being, and all human beings deserve your kindness..

-- On that same day I play fought with him but he kept hitting me, and I was and I am terrified that it is the beginning of transphobia-- and what if I'm not around enough to stop that hate from growing?

You know what really gets me?

--using the men's room with an undying fear of sexual assault. But I'm not going to use the women's room and let someone else win. Yet I still feel wrong. Why do I feel so wrong? Why do I feel like I'm living a lie no matter where I decide to take a shit, man?

It gets me

--every single goddamn time that I use the men's room and someone says "this is the men's room." Like wow thanks, not only can I read, as clearly I clearly made it past the first grade.. but also.. I can literally see all the men in here..

You know what really got me?

--when I got in trouble at 9 years old for beating up boys in the basement even though they were the ones that used plastic coat hangers to prod at MY vagina

You know what really got me?

--My step brother lying to me, saying he would never do anything to hurt me because I was his sister and he loved me.

You know what, *Joshua*, love doesn't make someone want to burn their **fucking body to the ground!**

You know what really gets me?

--Having sex with the love of my life.. Sharing these intimate, sacred moments, and then suddenly

--feeling like puking because she asks me to go on top and I've reverted back to age 5, and I'm back in his brother's room having my childhood stolen away from me.

It really got me

--when even at my favorite gay club, men still grabbed at my body like it was for their taking. Wasn't I supposed to be safe surrounded by my own community?

You know what really got me?

--telling my dad that any woman he dates as well as (particularly) his son would be super appreciative if he stocked his bathroom cabinet with pads  
-- him not wanting to talk about pads because its gross  
-- me feeling deeply wronged by this sentiment, and so of course lecturing him on period shame in India.  
--Most women in rural India don't get pads. Instead they use old sarees to soak up their blood. These women are filled with such shame surrounding this "work of the devil" that they won't throw these sarees away, instead opting to bury them in their yards. Young girls have killed themselves in India because of the alienating experiences that come with menstruation.  
--Don't tell me that pads are disgusting-- your sheer ignorance and utter lack of compassion are what is disgusting-- no, **revolting!**

You know what really gets me?

--having people talk about me like I'm not in the room. I have a name that you can refer to me by if you don't want to just speak directly to me!  
--being told at an old job that I could no longer wear my queer pin because it was inappropriate and offensive,  
--I'll say it again. This is my identity. MINE. It belongs to no one else. Therefore, the only. One. who has the right to police my identity, is me.

You know what really gets me?

--people saying I'm brave just for telling them about my identity. Yeah okay.  
--people asking for my dead name. No, good day.  
--reading my dead name on all of my medical prescriptions. It's fucking insane.

You know what really gets me?

--wondering why the FUCK there isn't a third option for gender or sex on my license.

You know what really gets me?

--The constant debate that I've caught myself up in.  
--Do I wear a pronoun badge, or don't I?

--What if I don't want to because it feels degrading and reductive?  
--But what if I have to because it is the only way to discreetly alert others to my preferences.  
--And what if it doesn't matter? What a dumb question,  
I don't have to ask, because I already know--  
--If I wear pronoun badges, people will still completely ignore them.  
--If I tell people my pronouns they will still completely ignore them.  
--But If I say nothing, accept playing girl for a few moments, I've decided to completely ignore me.

You what really gets me?

--knowing that looking like a woman keeps me safer from assuming figures of authority,  
--but also,  
being scared to walk to the dumpster alone at night

## On Being Shut Down

**Darby:** It's really hard to talk about gender when people say:

**Sam:** "Everything is what you make it. It's all about your attitude."

**AJ:** "You just gotta pull yourself up by your bootstraps."

**Eila:** But what if I don't have boots? And they don't even make bootstraps anymore.

**Darby:** "This whole MeToo movement has become a cult. One accusation and a man's career is over."

**Sam:** I don't know, the President's been okay after 23.

**Eila:** "A wage gap? Maybe if women chose better jobs and didn't have so many kids it wouldn't be a problem."

**Darby:** "Do you really think you should take this promotion? Shouldn't you be focusing on your family?"

**Caitlin:** "You say you don't want kids now, but you'll change your mind. And your husband might want them."

**Sam:** Have kids, don't have kids- there's never a right path for us is there? And who the hell said it's up to my husband?

**AJ:** "I'll last longer if you're on top."

**Alex:** But it's my first time...

**Darby:** "Can't afford tampons because of a little luxury tax? I think this is where the phrase, 'Stick a sock in it,' comes from."

**Caitlin:** Do you know how many people have died doing just that?

**AJ:** "So you hate men?"

**Caitlin:** "You mean femin-nazi."

**Sam:** "What's the point of feminism if it doesn't help men? That's just reverse discrimination."

**Darby:** You know you don't get the lightning bolts in Mario Kart when you're already in

first fucking place.

**Alex:** “But I’m a nice guy, I’ve never done that.”

**Caitlin:** That’s not the point. Why do you think I’m talking about *you*?

**AJ:** “Why are you so angry? It’s just a compliment.”

**Sam:** “It’s just a joke, I didn’t mean it like that. You can’t take a joke?”

**Darby:** As if you really meant it that way. . .

**Eila:** “Are you on your period?”

**Caitlin:** Nope. But I can make *you* bleed if you like.

**AJ:** “That fag in a dress ain’t gonna be a real lady until it chops it’s thingy off.”

**Sam:** But, she's more of a human than you will ever be

**Caitlin:** “You’re really flirty.”

**Alex:** And you're shit at reading signals.

**Darby:** “What do you mean you won’t have sex with me? Fucking bitch.”

**AJ:** Wow, two seconds ago, I was your sweetheart.

**Caitlin:** “You’ve been called down to the principal's office”

**Sam:** “I’m sorry but you can’t have your shoulders exposed like that.”

**Eila:** “But it's 100 degrees in here.”

**Sam:** “Your shorts are too short too. Do you have other clothes you can change into?”

**Eila:** “No...”

**Darby:** “It’s just locker room talk.”

**All:** "GET OVER IT"



## My Body is Not Up for Debate

Sam Wood

My body is not up for debate. Plain and simple as that. Now, let me explain. I am a political science major, one of the few majors at this school that has a masculine majority. Now, I am not saying every single male in this program is like this and for some reason I need to clarify this because I know there is someone out there wanting, waiting to say “but Sam, not all men”. But after years of sitting through classes with people who do not understand how their rhetoric, how their way of thinking affects not only myself, but other female or female presenting students in the class.

When you say, “I don’t think a woman should have a right to aborton,” or “I do not think that a woman should have access to x kind of birth control,” this is what it actually means to us: “I do not think that a woman has the right to her own bodily autonomy and that I think that we should control women’s bodies by telling them what they can or can not do with their bodies.” And yes, that is a direct 100% accurate translation of what you are saying. I do not care how liberal you think you are, if you say something like that, you sound like the extremist asshole who believes that women should not be treated the same as everyone else.

Now, I am not going to be diplomatic about this or passive about this because let’s be real, that is what you want me to do. But I’m not going to do that tonight because I have tried both those approaches and it does. not. work. The thing is, it is frustrating. I’ve tried to explain why not allowing women to have the access they need to abortion and birth control is actually more harmful than good. I’ve tried to explain how it actually goes against international law by not allowing women to have access to these resources. I’ve tried through conversation, I’ve tried

through papers shared with the class, I have tried presentations. And yet, to no avail, I cannot seem to reach you. You wouldn't let me tell you before, so I am telling you now.

“Now Sam,” you may say as you are stirring in your seat waiting to say something, “I'm simply trying to protect that unborn life.” I may respond with, “well, what about the life that already exists? What about the woman who may not be in the financial situation to have a child, or she could die if she carries the child to term, what if she isn't a she, or what if she was raped?” If you are, as truly Pro-Life as you say, then you should care about the life of the mother as well.

The unborn are the easiest to protect aren't they? Because you can just stop caring about them after they are born. They can not tell you that you are doing it wrong. They have not begun to think and exercise free will in ways that complicate your ideas of purity and goodness, of who is deserving of care. They have no voice and cannot speak so it is so easy for you for you to defend them. If you truly cared about life then you would also be fighting for people in I.C.E. detention centers and immigrants who are dying because of our government's ignorance. For any females out there who may say that they personally would never get an abortion or use birth control but are okay with other people who use it. I have no issues with you. Why? Because you are not trying to control my body. You are not saying, “I do not think that a woman has the right to her own bodily autonomy and that I think that we should control women's bodies by telling them what they can or can not do with their bodies.” You recognise that it is my body and therefore, my choice. And I respect your decision too because it is your body and your choice.

My body is not up for debate. I am done being nice about it. I am done just quietly sitting by and waiting for someone to mansplain why women should have access to these things. You are going to listen to what I say because I know that I am right. I am no longer sitting through

classes and being forced to listen to your “opinions” that actually do not matter. I do not put you and your bodily autonomy up for debate so I kindly ask that you do not put mine up for debate either.

## A Worse Word

Darby Murnane

Of the many complaints people have about vaginas, is the strangeness of the word itself. In Eve Ensler's original monologues she compared the word vagina to a rare disease or a medical instrument, the latter followed by an emphatic "Nurse! Hand me the vagina!" "Vagina" doesn't really roll off the tongue, does it? It's a spiky sounding word without any soft layers that might compliment the actual body part.

But I have an even stranger word for you: Vaginismus. Say that ten times fast. I dare you. Come on, try it.

I want you to know my struggle in learning to say the word, in trying to keep the sound of it in my memory long enough to attempt the pronunciation. Because I discovered this summer that the word applies to me.

Vaginismus is a dysfunction in the muscles of the pelvic floor, meaning the muscles of my vaginal canal. They're too tight and they can't handle penetrative pressure without spasming. Sometimes just trying to insert a tampon sets them off- it's like the door to my vagina is slammed shut and no amount of coaxing the knob or hinges will release it.

But god, do men love to say they only fuck tight pussies. Loose ones are aged or have been fucked too many times. Sorry fellas, but a tight pussy is an unaroused one, one that doesn't want you. A loose one wants you, that one's ready to let you in. And I can tell you from terrible, horrible experience that having a tight pussy is fucking painful.

I didn't know I had one until two summers ago. I was at my gynecologist's office and she gave me the choice of having my first internal exam and pap smear since I was nearing the age

when that test would be necessary. Since I wasn't sexually active it wasn't imperative to do the exam, but I figured eh, fuck it, I might as well. I'll have to get it done at some point, you know? Why not now while naked in the exam room? Some discomfort was expected, what with having my legs splayed on stirrups, my skin bare against the cold table and air, and a stranger staring into me. But I expected nothing more than that.

Then the doctor put the speculum in. There was a sudden feeling like something had punched through me, all the way up to my core, gripped my insides, and *pulled*. I heard a sound like a crank and a metal handle being spun and I felt the sides of the speculum pushing out to open up my vagina for the doctor to see and good god it felt like a carjack was inside me, tearing me open and stretching and ripping my vagina apart, my whole body apart. The pain was a sharpness like I'd never known, like knives were being used in place of the speculum. The pressure clawed up into my chest and every heartbeat slammed against my ribcage as if my heart wanted to split me open there too, and I cried out loud enough for a nurse to knock on the door and ask if we were okay. And I squeaked out an apology for the noise, still self-conscious and people-pleasing in spite of the pain, thinking that of course whatever the hell is happening here is really my fault for having a difficult body.

I heard the doctor say, "Oh, that's your cervix popping into place." And honestly, I couldn't tell you what that specifically felt like, every sensation was just a new layer of pain getting lost in the pain before it. Until the cotton swab went in, to scrape the sides of my cervix. That was a feeling like the swab was tracing a line for a fuse to be laid and lit, burning up through the inside of my body.

Then it was out and the doctor told me I needed to relax my body so she could remove the speculum, that my muscles were clenching around it. In broken, gasping speech I told her, “I can’t, it *hurts*.” Tunnel vision was setting in and gravity abandoned my head. My grip on the exam table was getting weaker and I was sure I’d topple off. Finally the speculum was out and the worst of the pressure faded. My vagina still throbbed with cutting sensations and a dry, scratchiness left behind by the cotton swab.

The doctor said in her soft voice, “You’re all done, you did really well” as every doctor says after the worst exams and procedures.

I croaked, “This is why I’m a virgin.” I can’t say the full weight and meaning of the pain hit me yet but there was an instinctual sense of what this meant for my life.

She swore up and down that this was *not* what sex is going to feel like, that arousal will work all sorts of biological wonders in the moment. Then she said that strange word, vaginismus, but it was barely a buzzing mumble in my ears. I couldn’t keep a grip on the sound, couldn’t remember it when I tried to repeat it to my mother later when I asked if internal exams always felt like that.

Every time I walk into a gynecologist’s office, I remember that pain. Every time a nurse escorts me into an exam room I ask, “Do you know if the doctor wants to do any internal work today? Because I just don’t handle it very well. . .” and fumble through explanations of how I nearly pass out from the pain. Sometimes the nurses know what vaginismus means, sometimes they don’t. But every time a doctor asks me to undress from the waist down, if I’m willing to try a quick exam, I still say yes, because I don’t want to get in the way of collecting all the necessary medical information. Sometimes I cry afterward, sometimes I don’t. Sometimes the doctor will

seem confused by the pain and say, “This shouldn’t hurt you that much,” and I will say, “But it does, I told you it would.” Sometimes they ask if I’ve been abused and I tell them no, and sometimes, like my surgeon, they say, “Well, the pain might be result of a previous exam, if it was so traumatic that the stress causes your body to react in this way,” because some can’t seem to conceive of the possibility that this pain isn’t the result of something, it just *is*, that maybe my vagina is just *wrong*, and while maybe that very first exam was traumatic after the fact, what the fuck made it that painful in the first place if the only answer here is pre-existing trauma? What the fuck put that in my head in the first place, if it really is all just psychological?

When I leave these appointments, I am sore for hours. It hurts to walk, sometimes it hurts to pee. I’m often riddled with abdominal cramps afterward and lightning bolt spasms will shoot up through me.

And I had just started to feel like I had finally claimed a feminine sexuality, that I didn’t have to be afraid of it anymore. And this diagnosis, a promise of pain in pursuit of my own pleasure, ripped it away. My own body was a traitor against me. I’m afraid of even my own touch for the pain it might cause; the barest inklings of physical arousal are enough to send cramps slicing through my belly. Most days I feel like I can’t get enough clothes on my body; exposure is suffocating and I must bury myself to breathe.

I saw an advertisement on TV for an erectile dysfunction treatment called Roman. You can sign up online with your phone and have medication shipped to your door as the company promises a discrete, easy process. But my only treatment options are dilators, and sure I can order those from my phone, but every doctor and physical therapist insists that I have to have a medical professional show me how to use them. One office in New York promises magic results

from their procedure where they'll inject my vaginal muscles with a little botox to paralyze the spasms while I'm under anesthesia and insert a dilator before I wake up. There is no discrete treatment for me, no daily pill to swallow with my morning orange juice. There are only things to shove up me and other eyes to oversee it.

I was recently, as in one week ago, diagnosed with PTSD because of all of this. I feel like I'm barely a wisp of my former self. As if I've pulled a strand of my hair from my pillow and wondering where I went.

Before I leave you, I want to ask you a few questions that have been on my mind recently. How many people have vaginismus and have no idea? Have you ever even heard of it before? I know I hadn't. I was lucky to find out about it in a doctor's office. How many people don't? How many people find out about it during their first encounter with intimacy with their partner on top of them and don't know what to do, don't know what's happening? I keep thinking that maybe, *maybe* if I'm relaxed enough, if I want it enough, if I'm turned on enough then maybe I'll be fine. But what if I'm not? What if I'm not fine and my partner doesn't listen, doesn't care, doesn't stop? What happens then?

These are my questions. And now they're yours.

## Trial of Woman

Eila McCulloch

When I was four years old, the only knowledge I had about the female experience came from the Bible. I knew that the angel Gabriel came down from heaven and told Mary that she was going to have a baby, and lo and behold, she did. I also knew that my mom had recently given birth to my brother, and when I asked about where babies came from, she told me that God made every child. So I put two and two together. I reached and maintained for several years the conclusion that, whenever God felt like it, he sent someone down from heaven to tell a woman that she was going to have a baby. The baby vessel had no real say in the matter. I also reached the conclusion that, upon observing my mother's stomach grow as my brother developed, the baby must grow in the stomach. And, like all other things that form in the stomach, it must be pooped out.

So when I was four years old, I was terrified of going to the bathroom because *what if God decided that I was pregnant but forgot to send someone down to tell me and I was about to shit out a human being right here in my bathroom?*

Apparently, that's not how it works.

It's worse.

When I was eight or nine, my mom bought me a copy of "The Body Book for Girls," after I began puberty at the ripe old age of seven. This book was the Bible for any and all adolescent girls who were beginning the process of growing into a woman, myself included. But

my mom told me not to look in the back of the book just yet, because she didn't want it to scare me. A rational request, right?

Wrong. I looked in the back of the book. I learned what a period was.

I got scared.

Sorry, Mum.

When I was ten, I was in the upstairs bathroom of my childhood home when I discovered that I had gotten my period. I began to cry, mostly because I was terrified of blood. I ran downstairs and told my mom that I had found "a lot" of blood in my underwear, which I now think is hilarious, because *boy howdy* did I not understand what "a lot" of blood was. Looking back, there were like three drops of blood that day, compared to the satanic waterfall that would pour from my uterus every few weeks for years to come.

When I was eleven, I was still the only one of my friends who had had their first period, so I was the one my closest friends went to to try and figure out what it was like to have one before they experienced it for themselves. One asked me "is it *scary*?"

I responded nonchalantly "Nah, not really. It's only scary when the cramps get so bad that I collapse on my bedroom floor and can't move for ten minutes."

*Obviously* that was the wrong thing to say, but in my defense, I thought this was totally normal. How could I think otherwise, when the only things I was ever taught about in sex ed were STDs and abstinence?

When I was twelve, I was catcalled for the first time by a truck full of men who drove past me as I went for a walk outside of my neighborhood. They were yelling and wolf-whistling, though it is hard for me to recall their voices now. I knew what they were doing because I had seen it in the movies, but I didn't know *why*; my face looked so gross and sweaty that day, my hair pulled into a day-old ponytail. It wasn't until later in life that I realized it wasn't my face they were whistling at.

I was *twelve years old* when the men of my town decided that my body was no longer my own.

When I was thirteen, I was in gym class on an exercise bike in the school's fitness center, when all of a sudden my foot slipped off the pedal and I fell. The thin end of the seat went straight between my legs, and it hurt like a *motherfucker*. I remember wanting to scream in pain but resisting the urge, because my school had conditioned me to believe that I should be neither seen nor heard. So instead I held my crotch in pain while my friends next to me laughed.

If I ever had an intact hymen, it definitely broke that day. Of course, our society has deemed that virginity is definitely a real, physical thing that has everything to do with that little piece of skin that not every girl even has, so--

I guess you could say that, when I was thirteen, I lost my virginity to a bike seat.

When I was thirteen--

and when I was fourteen--

and when I was fifteen, I was harassed and stalked by a group of boys in my class. They would say “hi” to me in between classes and would laugh at me with their friends no matter which way I responded. They grabbed me in the hallways, shouted at me while I was in class, screamed in my ear, whistled and gestured at me from the bus as I walked home, made moaning noises at me whenever I was near them, stroked my hair, told me just how good at sex they were and that they could show me a “good time”, tried to touch me during assemblies, and laughed whenever I asked them to stop, laughed whenever I went along with it to protect myself. They took turns being the main attacker. They tried to get me to go out with them. I don’t like to think about what they might have done if I did.

They messed with my head so badly that I could no longer tell the difference between lies and reality. I could no longer tell if they were being mean to me, or if *I* was, in fact, the bitch. That’s what everyone called me, either way. Rejecting my tormentors made me a bitch.

When I was fourteen, one day after school, those boys gathered all of their friends and cornered me in the hallway by the door so that I couldn’t leave until I gave them my phone number. Sure, I could have tried to push through them, but that would have just given them another excuse to touch me, wouldn’t it?

I just wanted to go, just wanted them to stop, so I caved. I left afterwards and cried to two friends who had never seen me cry before.

Those boys called me almost *every day* after that: in school, on the bus during field trips, as I walked to school, even during the summer when I was at home. I was convinced they knew

where I lived. I can still hear them laughing through the phone no matter how I answered their questions. I don't know why I ever picked up.

*Why didn't I just block them? Why didn't I tell anybody?* You're probably asking. I didn't want it to become any worse than it already was. Wouldn't you hide it, too, if it seemed like the whole school was on their side? Wouldn't you hide it, too, if you were the one that was punished for trying to get help?

I became ashamed of my belief in the good in boys and men. I became paranoid. I really did become a bitch.

I will never forgive those boys for what they did to me, to my self-esteem, for the psychological damage they caused.

And, more importantly, I will never forgive the teachers and staff who watched and let it happen.

When I was fourteen, I was told, to put it simply, that I couldn't possibly be a girl. My voice was deeper than all of the boys' in my class (it had been since I was twelve). The peach fuzz above my lip was dark like a mustache. My chest was too flat. My acne was too noticeable. My nose was too big. My legs were hairy. Anything they could think of to make me seem less womanly.

Less human, even.

I guess they were right, because every time I looked in the mirror, I didn't see a girl.

I saw a monster.

When I was fifteen, I was “dress-coded” so many times that I lost count, all because my shorts showed that I did, in fact, have legs that went above my kneecaps. In my homeroom teacher’s eyes, that meant that I was a whore and should be scolded for it in front of the class. She “measured” the length of my shorts regularly. Fuck the “dollar-bill rule.”

When I was sixteen, I was in class on a Sunday night, preparing to be Confirmed as an adult in the eyes of the Catholic church. For an hour that night we were shown pictures of unborn fetuses and told that abortion was unacceptable *no matter what*.

Even in rape. Even if the woman would die. Even if the woman and the child would die.

They told us verbatim that women were killing babies and that the abortion “crisis” was worse than the Holocaust.

When I was sixteen, my mom and I realized that, wow, my uterus really *does* hate me!

My periods were getting heavier, longer-- my longest one was a record of fifteen days straight --, more irregular, more painful each month to the point where I could not function in school. No pairs of pants were spared, and my lower spine felt like someone had tied a ten-pound weight to it and left it dangling.

I started taking medication. I had to. I thought of those crazy anti-abortionists, how they said birth control was a mortal sin, and I downed my first pill with a whole glass of water.

They must have forgotten that God loves and forgives us all, and that a young girl who just wanted her pain to end wasn’t an exception.

When I was seventeen, I joined Tinder after my first breakup.

Yeah, I know, it was dumb, an old friend already lectured me about it. Don't worry.

I just wanted to feel loved. I was delusional and sad and needed external validation. And I got it.

Then a boy on there told me he wanted to rape me.

I had thought we were friends.

I deleted my account.

When I was seventeen, I discovered that *holy shit women can masturbate too?!*

When I was nineteen, I learned that being a woman in college meant locking your dorm door at night, and walking alone with a jackknife in my pocket because weird old men would honk at me and a group of Mainer rednecks would drive past in their white pickup truck screaming about how they were going to “fuck me in the ass”.

There are so many other stories like that, like the sleazy dude in the music shop who told me to “smile for him”, or the oral surgeon who wouldn't stop calling me a “good girl” during my consultation like I was a dog, or the middle-aged men who would ogle at me in restaurants while my father sat next to me, or the drama director who wanted my scene partner to put his face in my crotch. But I'm too tired, and too angry, to recount them all.

When I was nineteen, I was cast in “The Vagina Monologues” for the first time. When we had our first read-through of the script, I remember thinking *oh God, what have I gotten*

*myself into?* But being in that show made me realize just how much I didn't know about my *own body*. How sheltered and uneducated I was. That growing up in an Irish-Catholic suburbia had taken a part in preventing me from getting the knowledge I needed as a woman.

On a totally unrelated note, when I was nineteen, I learned what the clitoris was.

When I was nineteen, I hooked up with a guy from Tinder for the first time.

Yes, I re-downloaded Tinder. I will not be answering any more questions about the subject.

Anyway, this was the first time I had ever had penetrative sex.

And it SUCKED.

There was no foreplay. There was no warming up to the act. There was no lube. This man seemed to truly believe that I would be hot and bothered enough from a five-second kiss and sucking his dick to let him anywhere near my insides. I instinctively clamped up, I think, because he couldn't get it in. I was drier than the motherfucking Sahara desert and this man had the *audacity* to ask me if this was the first time in a while that I had had sex.

This event set me up for sexual failure for the next year and a half.

When I was twenty, I tried having sex with my boyfriend at the time, and it didn't work, as it hadn't time and time before that. He said that maybe he was "too big," and threw himself a pity party all night because he couldn't get it in. I blamed myself because of his constant complaining, because I kept thinking that there was something wrong with *me*. What's the good

in having a vagina if it can't do what you need it to do? What's the good in it if it only causes you pain?

When I was twenty-one, I had my first pap smear. It was done by my doctor, whom I trusted, but I was still frightened of the whole idea. "I'm so sorry for whatever you're about to see down there," I warned her, very sincerely.

She looked at me, confused. "Why would you say that? What are you concerned about?"

I replied, "I've been concerned for *years* that my vagina is abnormal."

"What would make you think it's abnormal?"

"Because it hates me, Terri."

In a way, I was right. I had to be on medication in order to have a normal period, and I *still* couldn't have sex. But when the exam was over, she told me that everything looked and felt normal. That I was normal. I had never *felt* normal before. Could I really *be* normal?

Nope.

When I was twenty-one, after my very first successful attempt at penetrative sex that was still extremely painful, and after some extensive research on a hunch, I discovered that I have vaginismus, a condition that can cause pain during sex and the involuntary contraction of vaginal muscles during initial penetration. It can be caused by a physical abnormality, which my doctor had confirmed I did not have. It can also be caused by anxiety and a psychological resistance to sex. In other words, my vagina gets anxious. Gee, I wonder why.

When a Feminized Body Tries to Change  
Darby Murnane and Aiden Saulnier

[Together] **My body isn't working for me.**

**Darby:** My uterus is broken and I need it removed.

**AJ:** Uterus, more like *useless bitch!*

**Darby:** But I have to prove that. I have to prove more than that.

**AJ:** I remember the first time I told my moms (aka my mom and her mother) that I wanted to go on testosterone. They'd known that I was trans for years at this point, but this was a big sticking point for them. What if the hormones made me more depressed. So wildly depressed that I'd try to kill myself. Not to mention, they told me, once I start this process, there is no going back. What if I change my mind someday?-- Decide I like this body the way it is; decide I want my own children. Yeah, and what if I don't? How long do I have to live my life to make you happy?

**Darby:** I saw another surgeon at the Franklin Memorial Women's Care office. I was trying to find someone who might have another treatment idea beyond *another* birth control, *another* round of chemically induced menopause, or a hysterectomy. I told her that after what the first round of chemical menopause did to me, when push comes to shove, I'll fight for the hysterectomy. Her eyes visibly widened in shock.

**AJ:** I remember the day I called my moms and my dad on a group video call. I did not ask, instead I told them that I'd made a choice. MY choice-- to start hormone replacement therapy. I never expected that my dad would react the best out of three. But he did.

**Darby:** I'll have to undergo psychological evaluations to be cleared for the surgery. Because somehow I might not be thinking rationally, that my desperation to not be doubling over in pain everyday might be clouding my judgement, that I should still be considering my fertility.

**AJ:** That phone call with mom where she asks, "Why don't you want to be the strong, beautiful, intelligent, and independent woman that we raised you to be?" I mourn the loss of her only daughter with her.

**Darby:** They ask me, "Are you sure you won't have any regrets?"  
What is there to regret in a life without this kind of pain?

**AJ:** That call with my grandma where she cries about how I will mutilate my body for temporary relief. “You will never be able to feel pleasure there again!” Nobody was talking about bottom surgery, slow down!

**Darby:** And then they ask, “And what if your future husband says he wants kids?”

That’s his problem. Why should I have to account for the desires of some hypothetical he before the desires of my own? Why am I expected to give my body over to incubate what someone else wants?

**AJ:** Anyways, life is temporary, or did you forget? I am living one day at a time. I am making the choices that will make me feel joy at this moment. I am in pain now, but I see a light at the end. Sometime down the line, if I decide I no longer feel at peace with my choices, then I will reassess, change trajectory, and continue on.

**Darby:** Life is indeed temporary, and I am trying hard as I can to shrink the amount of time that I have to live like this. I know the hysterectomy is a choice I cannot take back but why should I put choices, like children, that I might *never* make, ahead of a choice for my own quality of life?

[Together]**Who knows if I will regret taking my body back? Who cares?**

Something bad had just happened.

"I was raped," she said.

Alone.

she was losing her mind. She began to blame herself.   
she thought   
horror   
the man who grabbed her throat, held her down and raped her that night. Afraid   
of what she might do to herself.

with an experience that destroyed her

[REDACTED] and [REDACTED] feelings of safety evaporate.

[REDACTED] the school allowed her alleged attacker to remain on campus even after a committee found him responsible for sexual assaulting her

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] male students. [REDACTED] had "unblemished

records" and "gave completely consistent accounts every time they were questioned." [REDACTED]

It's not in anyone's interest "to relitigate these cases in the newspaper."

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] her alleged rapist

[REDACTED] allowed [REDACTED] to destroy

[REDACTED]

alleged sexual assault victims,

but

prohibits the system from commenting publicly about specific reports of sexual misconduct. privacy law

feeling more

unsettled.

But she steeled herself

conduct committee had found the man responsible

The

She felt vindicated and relieved. Then, three days later, saw the man

She froze.

why was he still around?

[REDACTED]

At risk

not just she, but other girls, could continue to be

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

she still remembered the rape

[REDACTED]

didn't want to recount her story in detail again

again.

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED] the president of the college at the time.

[REDACTED] and overturned the decision to suspend him.

[REDACTED] she urged Woodward and the alleged assailant to "take advantage of alcohol awareness education and counseling."

[REDACTED] that is a slap in the face.

[REDACTED] "Everything I had fought for was taken away."

[REDACTED] "They took away every level of justice."

[REDACTED] She was numb.

[REDACTED] as if she weren't alive.

"I cannot imagine anything more these girls could have done. They were so  
[redacted] They were  
[redacted] incredibly honest [redacted] because it  
was the truth, and it didn't matter."

'It didn't matter'

[redacted] she lost a number of friends [redacted]  
[redacted] who also knew her alleged perpetrator: one told her she could have  
ruined the man's life. [redacted] at least, she knows she's not alone.

[redacted] so her  
story would be told.

[redacted]