

PRETTY DELICATE

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ABSTRACT

Pretty Delicate is a novel(la) about one young woman's on-going experience with anorexia and the impacts this disorder has on her relationships. Eating disorders are increasingly prevalent in contemporary Western society and across the globe. Many portrayals and treatments of these disorders rely on narratives of individualism, which harmfully places all blame or susceptibility onto persons struggling with eating disorders and wrongfully absolves their sociocultural contexts of any participation in the development of their eating disorder or the recovery process. This manuscript focuses on the beginning stages of anorexia through the way social messages / beauty standards are internalised and then dramatizes the arduous process of recovery. I refrain from sensationalising the worst of the disorder, as the aim of this project is to bring awareness to the ways community—through direct relationships, social media, and professional settings—enables disordered eating while simultaneously supporting recovery efforts. To emphasise the multi-faceted causes of eating disorders and approaches to recovery methods, *Pretty Delicate* utilises first-, second-, and third-person perspectives, and blends poetry and prose.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Pretty Delicate is a novel(la) about one young woman's ongoing experience with anorexia and the impacts this disorder has on her relationships. I will first cover disordered eating (specifically anorexia) as subject matter and its relevance to contemporary Western society. Secondly, I will define and situate novel(la)s within the tradition of Western women's writing and Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* with attention toward novel(la)s as a destabilising, hybrid form that questions traditional models of narrative and narrative construction. Third, I will explain how the novel(la) as a form aids characterisation and conveys important discussions around eating disorders in North America.

In Susan Bordo's tenth anniversary edition of *Unbearable Weight* (first published in 1993), she acknowledges that the "epidemic of eating disorders" is old stuff" with which many young women have first-hand experience through growing social media interactions (xxvii). Now, in 2019, the equivalent of Canada's entire population suffers from eating disorders in the United States, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD).¹ This figure does not include people who have disordered eating patterns but are not considered 'sick enough' to be officially diagnosed, nor does it include perpetual dieters who treat their prescribed (as in pre-made, pre-tested) diets in much the same way as anorexics worship their dietary rules. And what about everyone else who has that voice in their head, telling them they aren't *good enough*, that they need to *take control* or *get their body back*? (Funny how these internal

¹ The government of Canada has not conducted a nation-wide study on eating disorders, nor has it updated its information on eating disorders, since 2002. All major Canadian eating disorder research and help centers cite these out-dated archives when estimating how many people suffer from eating disorders in this country. I could have compiled resources from various provincial services to provide approximate figures, but the point I am trying to make relies not on statistics so much as an understanding in the prevalence of eating disorders as foundational.

thoughts mimic advertisements.) But ‘not everyone is literally starving themselves or exercising until they collapse.’ True. However, as Bordo argues—building on Susie Orbach’s 1983 presentation—the thought patterns and sociocultural elements that feed eating disorders work on all people in contemporary Western society, with the effects manifesting along a spectrum that crystalizes as eating disorders (61-2). These suggestions were radical in the 1980s, when both women first presented their theories, and are still radical today. For example, ANAD, cited above, still credits biological / genetic factors as the primary cause of eating disorders, which, while there is a genetic susceptibility, still largely ignores the impact of a sociocultural milieu that triggers anxieties and leads to disordered eating patterns. Ignoring or downplaying the role of sociocultural factors normalises disordered eating behaviours and insisting on biological imperatives or predispositions harmfully puts the individuals suffering from eating disorders in a place where their bodies are responsible for their disorders. This removes an acknowledgement that their communities are responsible for perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards. This is not to say that mainstream, photoshopped beauty standards are the sole social cause, but that they do contribute to distorted perspectives of self and have a wide-range of impacts because of how readily available these images are to the majority of the Western population.

Bordo examines various food advertisements—such as Jell-o, ice cream, and Weight Watchers pasta—to unpack how advertisers reiterate traditional gender roles to consumers, thereby reinforcing ideas that women should not eat as much as men and that women should primarily be focused on providing food to others instead of eating it themselves (“Hunger as Ideology” 99-134). These ads were printed, the type that would appear on billboards or in magazines, though she does also briefly discuss some TV commercials. Bordo’s book came before the explosion of social media. Before people literally began constantly carrying cameras in the form of cellphones. Before people had access to Photoshop and other digital technologies outside of corporate use. Bordo

acknowledges that her students know many of the images in advertisements they see are altered but says this is not “usable knowledge” because they cannot really connect with such an abstraction (104). Today, anyone can use a basic image-editor—they come with cellphone cameras and as built-in tools on Instagram or Snapchat. And while this turns the abstraction of photo-editing into a concrete reality with which most people have first-hand experience, it results in two negative outcomes. The first being that celebrities posting on these sites will often tag their images with “#nofilter” to indicate that they did not edit their photo, when at times they have edited their photo, or they have an arsenal of dieticians, personal trainers, make-up artists, stylists, etc. who help turn them into an image that does not ‘need’ a filter. Second, these social media apps allow people to manipulate images of themselves (selfies) in real-time. For example, Snapchat has many filters that identify a person’s face and can apply various types of makeup or adjust the size / shape of a person’s face (sometimes into cartoon-like proportions, but other times into insidiously ‘flattering’ shapes by shaving down certain features and emphasising others). The photo captures after a filter is applied, not the opposite way, as is the case for most photo-editing technologies. This means that individuals can craft a ‘perfected’ image of themselves almost instantaneously—an image which can then be idolised as the perfect version of themselves—for up to ten seconds.² People no longer look only at celebrities or other people as aspirations for how they would look—they can manufacture an image of themselves all on their own.

² Snapchat is famous for being a social media app that lets users select the duration for a recipient to view an image. To combat this ephemerality, many recipients will screenshot an image they wish to view again—if this is done, the sender is notified. This can create a feedback loop depending on what (if any) images an individual’s friends / family choose to ‘save.’ For example, if an individual’s partner continually screenshots images where a makeup filter is used, the individual sending the snaps will internalise the message that they look more desirable with that filter. (This is not to critique people who tend to save the edited images, but rather to point out that edited images are so prevalent that contemporary Western society accepts these images without questioning the larger impacts they have on individuals’ psyches.)

However, this influx of social media has also become a place for social change and resistance. Debbie Ging and Sarah Garvey conducted a study on the intersections of Instagram and eating disorders and found that while there are certain hashtags and accounts that promote group accountability for pursuing eating disorders—for example, someone would post a challenge to eat only a specific amount of calories in a day, and followers would post that they accomplished this task—these accounts are also sites of community building (1196). Additionally, this report found that even with the more dangerous accounts that promote disordered eating, the communal space offered by social media provides a network of other people and helps combat the loneliness and isolation that plagues many individuals with eating disorders (1197-8). Anorexics have long been acknowledged as having a disproportionately high suicide rate, but Ging and Garvey indicate in their study that Instagram communities can be a place where people help talk each other through suicidal thoughts because suicidal anorexics will reach out to others in their situation without fear of being judged or mocked (1193-6).

Outside of social media, eating disorders have often been considered to exist solely in the realm of upper-middle class (or upper class) white women—a demographic for which the refusal of food amidst plenty shows femininity and restraint; literally an embodiment of the female ideal. However, this representation is false, as eating disorders impact communities globally and across class, race, ethnic, gendered, and religious lines (Bordo xviii-xxiv). In my opinion, this stereotype has been so resilient to change because the representations of eating disorders that appear in media often focus on young, rich, white women. Many social media accounts dedicated to eating disorder recovery focus on an intersectional approach that acknowledges race, gender, age, (dis-)abled bodies, and sexuality—such as @bodyposipanda and @i_weigh—but representations in other media (ads, television, movies, literature) have yet to become so inclusive.

To the Bone, a Netflix original by writer and director Marti Noxon, has been described as one of the most accurate representations of anorexia in popular media, but it features an all-white (or all-white passing) cast except for the nurse Lobo, played by actress and comedian Retta. The film follows Ellen's experience at an in-patient facility and through the setting introduces multiple people dealing with eating disorders. This presents many opportunities for diversity; however, *To the Bone* instead insists on maintaining stereotypical roles with the eating disorder patients being relatively well-off (this is America, the program is pricey) white women (except Luke, a ballet dancer and white man). The sole black woman plays an overweight nurse, thus reinforcing the stereotype that black women cannot have eating disorders.

Another example of mainstream media addressing eating disorders occurs in season one of *Pretty Little Liars*, where the character Hannah is shown in flashbacks to have been the 'fat friend,' who becomes the most popular girl in school by 'learning' how to properly purge after 'overeating' (season 1). Hannah is, of course, a well-off, young, white woman. This plotline reaches its pinnacle in the thirteenth episode and is then quickly abandoned for the duration of the show (which spans seven seasons), and the character excels in her 'new' body as perfectly healthy and popular with no major implications of her eating disorder. The subtext of an eating disorder being treated in this way is that 'trying out' bulimia or anorexia is akin to dieting when done short-term and can fulfil one's desires for thinness and happiness.

Memoirs of eating disorders are often more accurate representations than those found in films, both regarding the personal impacts of the disorders and issues of diversity and intersectionality. Jenni Schaefer's *Life Without Ed* (2004) is an account of her battle with her eating disorder and a guide to how others can break the cycle of their own disorder with interventions by her therapist, Thom Rutledge, who explains various therapies and provides exercises for readers who also struggle with disordered eating habits. Rutledge's interventions often discuss how Jenni

used those same exercises, or how other people in her group therapy reacted in different, but still productive, ways, pointing to the multifaceted nature of recovery. Grace Bowman depicts herself in the third person in her novelized memoir *Thin* (2007) with breaks between chapters where she reflects on her disordered thinking and behaviours of the preceding chapter. Bowman emphasises her position as an intelligent young woman and how her disorder was often seen as a sign of great success to the people around her, as she obsessively exercised and restricted food while attending Cambridge. Portia de Rossi details in *Unbearable Lightness* (2010) the excruciating circumstances of her own eating disorder as it coincided with the breakdown of her first marriage and negotiations of her coming out as a lesbian while occupying a celebrity role. A work of auto-fiction, Judith Fathallah's *Monkey Taming* (2015) follows the protagonist Jessica (a representation of Judith herself) as a pre-teen Muslim girl in America who is hospitalised and undergoes group therapy for her eating disorder. These examples are instances where women document their own eating disorder struggles, and in doing so highlight the wide-ranging social conditions that shaped their own thoughts and emotions during and after the worst of their illnesses.

Fictional literary representations of eating disorders straddle the gap between recent filmic representations and literary memoirs, where the not-eating of food can become symbolic of certain specific stressors in a character's life. Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) does not name Marian's inability to eat as anorexia or any other disorder, but instead attributes her inability to eat to the protagonist's personification of food—a misperception caused by the social upheaval of the 1960s and the negotiations of femininity and expectations. While I disagree with diagnosing characters (I am not a doctor and characters cannot answer questions), the idea of not-eating being associated as a symptomatic response to sociocultural circumstance exemplifies Bordo's arguments about the ways anorexia functions to crystallise social anxieties—Bordo's initial

theorisations were drawn from her research into women negotiating life post-WWII and the various meanings of femininity (140-41).

After Atwood, Steven Levenkron published *The Best Little Girl in the World* (1978), a novel that explicitly features anorexia. Levenkron is an American psychotherapist who began studying and treating eating disorders in the 1970s, and he writes about a young woman who seeks help from a therapist in dealing with her anorexia (and part of this process is acknowledging her own complicity in prolonging the illness). While this book provides insight into anorexia as a disorder—the effects on the body and mind—it problematically attributes much of the disorder to the patient rather than as a result of a complex matrix of sociocultural intersections. The disorder is seen more as a side-effect of growing up rather than as a side-effect of growing up *in a particular social setting*.

A contemporary example set in the decade following Levenkron's novel is Lisa Murphy-Lamb's *bildungsroman*, *Jesus on the Dashboard* (2017). In her novel, the protagonist Gemma suffers from anorexia as a side-effect to growing up in the 1980s without a mother. While the eating disorder is portrayed with nuance throughout, and the social causes are emphasised as outside of the character, Gemma's recovery seems a too-easy afterthought in the book's denouement. In the final chapters, Gemma makes peace with her absent mother, gains weight, and commits to gaining more weight. Murphy-Lamb's book accurately addresses the sociocultural aspects of anorexia but fails to acknowledge the addictiveness that accompanies anorexic behaviours—a trait that makes recovery a looping and ongoing process, not a singular decision.

Written and set in contemporary North America, Mona Awad's debut novel *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* (2016) is one of the best examples in literary fiction of a character dealing with an eating disorder. Awad presents a story of how Western beauty standards and traditional notions of femininity impact her character Lizzie's body image and the complicated nature of her

eating disorder. Lizzie bounces between extremes—at times exercising constantly and measuring every piece of food, and at others bingeing for months—and this ricocheting behaviour causes strife in her personal relationships with her husband, neighbours, and coworkers.

Understanding that eating disorders arise (partially, if not primarily) from a multiplicity of sociocultural forces (such as ads, social media, TV shows / movies, literature), but that these same forces can offer solace in the form of representation or community building is crucial when approaching a project that seeks to contribute positively to communities grappling with eating disorders.

After understanding the various sociocultural practices and representations that impact individuals in profound ways, I had to negotiate what form or genre would best serve conveying this reality while also generating interest and empathy—two main goals of all writers if they wish to have readers. I will explain my conception of novel(la)s and how they function in relation to other modes of writing. After establishing the formal elements of my work, I will return to the above discussion of eating disorders and representations of them and focus on how the novel(la) as form serves the content of *Pretty Delicate*.

Novel(la)s, as I conceive of them, are concise, women-centric narratives that cross genres and defy easy categorisation. The boundaries between short stories, novellas, and novels are already riddled with slippage. *The Great Gatsby*. *Heart of Darkness*. *Of Mice and Men*. *The Old Man and the Sea*. *Death in Venice*. *The Metamorphosis*. *The End of the Affair*. Where do we place these texts? The short answer: in the literary canon. University professors will teach F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a novel or novella, depending on the course. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as either a long-short story or a novella. Etc., etc. I am less concerned with delineating the boundaries of these genres—short story, novella, novel—and far more concerned

with creating a new space that does not exist between these previous designations, but one that instead operates in parallel. Novel(la)s are where we find the women.

But, before I continue, I want to pause a moment and reflect on my nomenclature: novel(la)s. ‘Novel(la)’ sounds like ‘novella’ and only appears different on the page. This is crucial. Parentheses denote the inessential, an aside, an interesting piece of commentary that the real writing of the piece doesn’t need. The words that appear inside the curved marks could be removed, and nothing would be lost.

And yet. Parentheses draw the reader’s eye—seem to call for attention. Aren’t we told, when we write, to make every word count? If each word matters, if every word must be present, then why do we have a type of punctuation that implies the opposite?

Parentheses are marginal. They do not often make an appearance in creative writing—are relegated to academic papers where the author feels compelled to display their intelligence.

(I want to take this grammatological device and use its inherent aesthetic appeal to draw attention to the marginal, the so-called ‘removeable.’ Women have been living within the parentheses of academia, of Western society, of almost everywhere. We know that parentheses are *supposed* to be marginal, but we know they do not appear in the margins of a page, they insert themselves into the main points.)

And so, novel(la)s are where we find women. Women writers resist conforming to male standards and instead have a history (a herstory, if you prefer) of conning form, of inserting their works between their male counterparts. Alice Munro, Larissa Lai, Nicole Brossard, Aritha van Herk, Evelyn Lau, Marian Engle³. Each of these writers uses the sentence to remake the short story,

³ This list is not exhaustive, but merely a sampling of Canadian female writers. Canadian because I feel a false familiarity with them—joined by geography, by the more-or-less arbitrary maps’ lines. My concern with *placemeant* evident in this list, as is my preoccupation with the second-wave feminists (of wanting to push them further, into the present moment).

the novel, the novella. Women flitting through their pages but undoubtedly present (even in their disappearing). Juliette, Nu Wa, Mélanie, Arachne, Mary, Lu, to name a few. Their stories—the writers’ and the characters’—push against male definitions of what constitutes genre, what can be written. (Because, as we know, these stories are ‘women’s writing,’ and as such are relegated to being by, for, and about women, as if women are not quite persons, their stories not universal *enough*.)

Though we find women in novel(la)s, I do not configure this categorisation as a by- for- about-women only form. Merely a space, a literary space, where this form of writing is met and assessed on its own terms—a place where male-centric expectations falter, cannot find purchase. A notable example of a novel(la) by a man is Robert Kroetsch’s *The Hornbooks of Rita K*. George Bowering, considering Kroetsch’s work, argues “if *The Hornbooks of Rita K* is a book of poems, then it may be the best book of poems that Robert Kroetsch has ever written...It pretends to offer a list, a sequence, a narrative—and does everything it can to subvert those reassuring codes of order” (back cover). Kroetsch’s book follows Raymond as he attempts to locate the missing Rita through the scraps of poetry she has left behind. Written in prose, poetry, and / or prose-poetry, this book doesn’t place Rita, yet she appears (as if of her own accord) as a void in the center. As demonstrated by the above quote, people have difficulty describing the genre of this work because Kroetsch’s book resists traditional renderings of Rita (the woman protagonist), and as such must resist the traditional forms of writing.

These ideas of resistance and of searching out new forms for women-writing (as opposed to male-writing, the types of which are found in Western literary canons) are not new. Hélène Cixous, in her theorisation of *écriture féminine*, states that: “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (875). And in

writing herself, in and when writing women / women-writers, I have found the form must follow, must also change. (I am lucky that I found Cixous early in my writing career because in her words I found permission to write in a new way—a way that was not new, *per se*, but new to me, a way not taught when professors lectured on the aforementioned canonical texts.)

Similarly, Virginia Woolf warns young women writers that “it is useless to go to the great men writers for help,” and there is no truer statement (88). We can learn imagery and the balance between narration and action. We can learn plot and dialogue and setting. The basic components. We can take what we can, but male writers do not set out to teach us, to allow us a form or forum for ourselves, or one which allows our writing to be approached and encountered outside of comparisons to their own works. (Even when we write outside of their bounds, these comparisons are still made, we are said to have ‘subverted’ expectations or notions or any number of ‘established’ codes, as Bowering mentions in his above quote.)

Novel(la)s therefore are unlikely to follow traditional structures or forms—such as the Freytag Pyramid—as these forms necessitate comparison to previous, male-dominated works. The purpose is to refocus narrative absolutely and find alternative methods of story telling, which *Pretty Delicate* does through blending poetry and prose, as well as utilising tactics of prose poetry in prose sections (ie: non-standard punctuation and attention to rhythm). This dismissal of traditional forms of writing, from the sentence to the larger structure, results, in the case of my manuscript, in the lack of a clear climax. “Part One” establishes characters and builds tension at the beginning of Cate’s disorder, but the expected climax—the moment she know she needs professional help or her experiences in the hospital—is withheld, making the climax a void around one third of the way into the manuscript. What follows is what would normally be considered denouement, though this is inaccurate because the denouement should not take as much space or time as it is given in *Pretty Delicate*. The effect of not presenting a traditional climax further establishes this work as a hybrid

form (as most books of poetry also lack a clear climax) and therefore necessitates readers to divest themselves of traditional expectations of narrative.

This hybrid form of writing relies not only on the finished product (ie: the book) but also on destabilising the process of writing. While many authors do not write linearly, creative writing classes teach students to write around the climax, which should be the most interesting part of the story. This means that often the middle is written, and the edges filled in; however, without a typical climactic moment, the writing process itself must change. While writing *Pretty Delicate*, I divided my work into the different sections, as I had specific goals for each section which will be discussed below. Within each section, I wrote and edited each scene on its own, paying attention to the purpose of each scene. After several rounds of revision, I then printed my scenes and arranged them on my floor as a collage or puzzle to figure out how each scene worked with each other scene and what effects certain scenes had when placed together. For example, though I wanted “Part Four” to have exhaustingly long scenes, I made sure to not have multiple long scenes adjacent to each other, as this would depart too much from the flow established earlier in the manuscript, and could also be too exhausting for a reader which could result in them not continuing to read my manuscript. After organising each section, I would then edit for logic and chronology across the section. For example, “Part One” spans April to August, and once I had decided where each work scene would fit, I had to map out whether Cate was in her last month of classes or working full time and the corresponding weather.

Now that I have established the theoretical frameworks within which I conceived and wrote *Pretty Delicate*, I will demonstrate how these theories manifest within both the structure and content of my thesis in an interconnected web of cause and effect that seeks to mirror the sociocultural phenomena and their effects that contribute to disordered eating and behaviours. First, I address each of my four parts and epilogue individually, while situating my manuscript within

our larger cultural context of eating disorder and recovery narratives. Second, I focus on elements that are common across the various parts, such as social media use, which, as explained earlier has direct implications for individuals living with eating disorders, some positive, some negative.

Told in first-person present-tense, “Part One: Forks on the Left” solidifies Cate’s voice and tone immediately, as the italicised internal voice grows and works toward being its own character. At times this internal voice mimics Cate’s own voice, as in the second scene of the manuscript where Cate’s criticism of the dry shampoo in her hair sounds in the same register as the voice’s critique of her acne. In other places, the voice appears to take on a maternal tone, as when Cate is surveying herself in her mother’s hand-me-down dress before going to photograph a wedding. This seeming inconsistency conveys the early stages of Cate’s experience of an eating disorder—so early that she barely acts on much of the advice and does not outwardly exhibit signs of anorexia—and indicates that this voice is comprised of ideas from many sources within Cate’s cultural context. She bears the weight of familial expectations as well as comparisons between herself and her peers (such as Wren and Wren’s soon-to-be sister-in-law, Anastasia) on top of a daily bombardment of advertisements and Instagram models.

Importantly, the voice manifests as female. Susan Bordo notes that the internal voice most anorexics experience is male and argues that this is due to a cultural understanding of male voices as carrying superior intelligence in contrast to the untrustworthiness of women that maps onto the untrustworthiness of female bodies (155). This fits with Jenni Schaefer’s observation that she and most of the women she interacted with during her recovery conceptualised of their internal voices as men (which they dubbed “Ed”) (xxi). However, both these texts were published in 2004 and written about women growing up during the 1980s-90s and very early 2000s. While people have continued suffering from eating disorders, feminism has changed the gendered interactions millennial women experience, and many women now posting about their eating disorders on social

media platforms (such as Instagram) identify their internal voices as female (@my_life_without_ana, @beating_ana, @_beating.ana_).⁴ I believe this is because women who began joining the workforce during second wave feminism and the Cold War era were brought up in a culture that considered equal rights to be ‘equal to white, straight men,’ and many of the ‘successful’ women were often pitted against each other, hence, the tendency for women to believe their own empowerment was in constant competition with other women seeking to succeed. Millennial women are the daughters of those women who grew up navigating sexism in a time of extreme political upheaval, and those women have passed on their learnings of their world to their daughters who are entering the workforce in a time of intersectional feminism that relies on an understanding of supporting all women to ensure mutual success. It follows then, that millennial women (the demographic featured in my manuscript) would prioritise women’s voices over men’s, and that this would likely carry into their internal voices.

Additionally, Cate’s internal voice is not only a source of ridicule or harassment, but at times turns the negative attention toward other women (as with waitresses that Cate perceives as threats to her relationship with James), offers good advice (such as when it tells Cate that relationships need compromise), or compliments (when the voice congratulates Cate on her gym session). I use this strategy to solidify Cate’s position as a woman raised by a woman who learned to distrust other women while acknowledging the existence of sexism. Writing these seeming conflicts into the voice also emphasises the similarities between internal voices of eating disorders and domestic abusers, a commonality that Schaefer used to help herself understand how to break her disordered patterns (“Introduction” xix-xxix).

⁴ This is merely a sampling. Countless accounts of women identifying their internal voices as female can be found by searching either “ana” (as I did) or “mia” (if studying bulimia) in the Instagram search bar.

This voice combined with Cate’s hyper-attention to minute details of her unsatisfactory everyday life set the stage for her disordered eating and perceptions of food to manifest as anorexia. However, my manuscript does not detail this extreme decline, as Cate’s experience jumps from these beginning stages to her hospitalisation (“Part Three: Immersion Blending”). Bridging these two sections of *Pretty Delicate* is “Part Two: Simmering.” This part is a short collection of epistolary poems written by Leah for her sister as Cate battles her worsening illness leading to her stay in hospital. The poems in this section grapple with Leah’s emotional responses to Cate’s illness, including sadness, rage, frustration, and disappointment, along with fear and hope. Leah has a clear understanding of her sister’s illness, and knows that Cate was at risk of dying, though she attempts to lessen the severity of this knowledge by debating which ‘supernatural’ creature her sister resembles. Eventually, she decides that Cate is a zombie (an undead, ugly, constantly hungry, and unintelligent monster that used to be human). Though the comparison is harsh, Leah’s love for her sister comes through in the recipe poems, where she attempts to show Cate that food is about enjoying the company and the processes of cooking and eating as much as it is about the food itself.

I chose to write “Part Two” as poetry because I have been developing a style across several manuscripts where poetry is used in places of great emotional upheaval for characters.⁵ Poetry allows for the breakdown of proper grammatical structure and linear thought, therefore creating a space where the psychic distance between character and narrator dissolves into one voice that carries with it the inarticulateness of emotion. Leah does not speak of her feelings, rather, she speaks around them, focusing on pop culture references (such as Zombies), personal anecdotes (about her life with her girlfriend), and concrete actions (like cooking). These are all situations that could have been written as prose, but as poetry, the internal narrative / dwelling on thoughts and

⁵ My chapbook, *Marianne’s Daughters*, (and its larger manuscript) is one example of this blended form (published by Loft on EIGHTH, 2018).

feelings is removed and allows the reader to instead feel the emotions with Leah. The epistolary element of Leah's poems provides a reason for her attempts at articulation—she wants to explain and justify her actions to Cate (we learn at the end of “Part Three” that Leah convinced Cate to seek help in the form of hospitalisation, but after doing so refused to visit her sister).

An example of poetry being used this way—as an epistolary explanation that closes the gap between speaker and narrator and removes the formality of narrative itself—is A. B. Dillon's *Matronalia*. This poetry collection is written by the author to her daughter as apology for not being able to provide ‘motherly’ love, as the speaker grieves her daughter's future, which she sees as being dominated by casual sexism in the workplace or domestic confinement at best and rape or death at worst. This grief is joined with the mother's anger at her complicity in the patriarchal system (her complicity being her position as a mother).⁶ The effect of *Matronalia* is overwhelming in its execution of such a singular topic and raw emotions. When writing “Part Two,” I compared my work with Dillon's, as both are feminist, epistolary, poetic interventions governed by anger and grief, and I decided to limit Leah's section of poetry so as to avoid this section dominating my manuscript.

Leading out of the poetry is “Part Three: Immersion Blending,” which is another shorter section (when compared with “Part One” and “Part Four”) that revolves around Angie (Cate's mom), Wren, and James visiting Cate in hospital. This is the first section where Cate's mother makes an appearance (other than allusions to her in “Part One”). Told in a limited third-person, the scenes in this section each follow one of Cate's loved ones, but never Cate herself, except for the second-last scene where the narrator shifts between the various characters (though still refrains

⁶ I attended Dillon's book launch in Calgary, where she revealed that she and the speaker are the same, but that she refuses to have her full name associated with the book because she does not want to cause further harm to her daughter. She said she did want the book in the world, however, so other mothers with similar struggles could know that they are not alone.

from entering Cate's mind). "Part Three" had the potential to be the most sensationalised section of this manuscript, and so I thought it appropriate to confine the scenes to the immediate vicinity of the Foothills Hospital (where the eating disorder treatment facility in Calgary is located) except for the Banff scene where all the characters get together.

There are many recovery narratives that focus on a protagonist's experience in an institutionalised group setting, such as Judith Fathallah's *Monkey Taming* and Marti Noxon's *To the Bone*, both of which focus on recoveries from eating disorders, or director Betty Thomas's film *28 Days*, which focuses on addiction recovery more broadly. I've found that these narratives follow a standard plot-arc: a reluctant, strong-willed woman is forced into a recovery institution where she makes some friends, stumbles in her recovery process, then becomes really committed to recovering after one of her new friends dies, and presumably lives a decently happy life once released from hospital (or clinic, or other in-patient facility). I did not want *Pretty Delicate* to be a story focused solely on an individual's progress, as these traditional recovery-arcs typically insist, but instead wanted to draw attention to the other people in Cate's life who have stakes in her recovery and exist in the same sociocultural morass as her. This decision moves the attention of recovery away from the individual who, alone, must decide if they really want to help themselves and back onto the community that contributed to the illness's development. In doing so, I aim to reconfigure perceptions of eating disorders as individual afflictions that promote and maintain isolation. An individual is not the lone reason behind developing their eating disorder and should not be expected to recover by pure force of will, especially when this disorder shares traits of addiction (Schaefer 124-9).

Breaking further with typical recovery narratives, "Part Three" leads into "Part Four: Room for Dessert," the longest section of this project, and the part where Cate faces the reality of recovery and of living in the same cultural context that contributed to her initial illness. As mentioned above,

most recovery narratives end when the patient leaves treatment, or, in some cases, when she has finally decided to commit to treatment, and the story then implies the patient succeeds and will live a happy life. But eating disorders do not work that way—there is no fixed schedule or timeline for recovery, and though an individual needs a supportive community environment, they will still have to fight against the illness.

To mirror the tedium and exhaustion of simply getting through each day, “Part Four” no longer includes the “****” mechanic for time-jumping that occurred in “Part One,” and instead follows Cate and emphasises the minute details of her days. Inevitably, this makes most of the scenes within “Part Four” much longer than the scenes in previous parts. On “Day 35” Cate decides to bake Leah a birthday cake, and this scene goes into scrupulous detail about finding the ingredients, going shopping for missing ingredients, baking the cake, cleaning up, getting sick, then finishing the cake. This scene itself is longer than the entirety of “Part Two,” which spans several months as opposed to “Day 35,” which is several hours. Earlier in the manuscript, I wanted to condense emotion to convey how Cate’s illness impacts Leah, but at this point, readers know Cate’s disorder is upsetting, and I want them to feel the exhaustion alongside her. I achieve this effect by making single days in “Part Four” feel as long as—or even longer than—the months and years that passed prior by letting these scenes span across many pages. (This has the accompanying effect of taking a reader a longer time to get through scenes with more pages; the reader’s experience simulates Cate’s experience of time). Engaging deeply with the reality of eating disorder recovery as a long, arduous, and cyclical process is important if my project is to succeed at communicating that even with willpower and community support, recovery is difficult and without a clear end, though still desirable.

“Part Four” is also designed to highlight the various paths of recovery, and I do this through Cate’s new friend Haisley. The young women meet during the Day Patient program (an after-

hospitalisation treatment which requires patients to meet for twelve hours a day and learn basic skills, such as how to negotiate family dinners and communicate with loved ones, but that allows them to live in their own homes and have freedom on evenings and weekends). Throughout, Cate and Haisley both reference their time and what they learn in Day Treatment and how they individually negotiate rebuilding their lives—for example, Cate begins baking cakes and adopts the cat Buttercream, while Haisley prefers to volunteer at the Meow Foundation and limits her interactions with food to meals-only. I chose to highlight the different approaches to recovery to create an inclusive narrative where potential readers who have alternative paths from Cate’s would still feel valid.

Another way in which my manuscript resists prescribing specific recovery methods is in my avoidance of introducing medical professional characters—these characters exist peripherally, but never directly make an appearance in the text. This is done because treatment methods are often varied and tailored to individual circumstances. While shared sociocultural experiences contribute to developments of eating disorders, and while similar treatment strategies often work—like approaching eating disorders as abusive relationships—individuals interpret and process these cultural triggers and treatment methods according to their unique perspectives.

As stated earlier, I am not a medical professional, nor have I personally experienced being hospitalised for an eating disorder, and so another reason for choosing not to dramatize interactions between Cate and healthcare professionals is to avoid appropriating or mis-representing very real and difficult situations. My thesis is concerned with prioritising the social aspects of eating disorders (regarding both development and treatment) and so delving into the medical treatments is inappropriate and beyond the scope of this project. Furthermore, I am aware that certain readers who might be suffering from eating disorders and who are not convinced they need treatment could approach this book as a ‘how-to guide’ on becoming more effective in following the demands of

their disordered thoughts.⁷ By not dramatizing Cate at the worst of her disorder, and by not engaging with the medical practices or discussions that reveal Cate’s practices during her worst, I allow the focus on my manuscript to remain on recovery and social issues that contribute to eating disorders.

The “Epilogue” continues in the first-person present-tense perspective of “Part Four” with a significant change being the headers of each scene shifting from specific days (as in “Part Four”) to more generalised time-indicators (months, to years, and ending on a vague “Later”). In “Part Four,” these headers counted the days since Cate’s release from the hospital, and what some people would classify as being the number of days in recovery. This attention to counting the days follows from Cate’s growing obsessions with counting / measuring / weighing that were seen during the Sobey’s scenes in “Part One,” and fit with her experience of anorexia. While an “Epilogue” to this manuscript might be expected to indicate recovery through the absence of the italicised voice, I instead use the increasingly generalised headers to convey Cate’s progress. Cate, like many people suffering from eating disorders, will always experience that internal voice, though it may fade for increasingly longer stretches of time. To demonstrate this, the italicised voice is not in the first “Epilogue” scene and this first scene feels in the same vein as “Part One,” but then the voice and style of “Part Four” return in the following “Epilogue” scene. Typically, epilogues are a final scene or chapter meant to round out the narrative or provide a glimpse at how the characters have fared at a point after the story-proper has ended. My “Epilogue” is comprised of three scenes to highlight the looping themes of recovery and that Cate’s story is not one that could ever be rounded off with a single scene.

⁷ Many eating disorder memoirs do go into specific detail about disordered behaviours (in particular, Portia de Rossi’s *Unbearable Lightness*), and while these are important narratives, they are not mine to tell and I fear including those detail in Cate’s story would detract from my goal of situating eating disorders as a social issue rather than a personal struggle.

Common across *Pretty Delicate* is the use of various social media platforms by the characters. As a photographer, Cate often uses Instagram, both to promote her own work and to research different exercise and eating practices in “Part One.” Later, in “Part Four,” she uses this app to celebrate her recovery ‘wins,’ particularly when she is actually struggling (as on “Day Zero,” when she documents her curry). These conflicting uses highlight the way Instagram functions in everyday life: a tool for career advancement, disseminating disordered eating patterns and behaviours, but also a platform for raising eating disorder awareness, depending on how individuals choose to use the app.

In “Part One,” Cate and her friends use Snapchat filters to modify their facial features in real-time as they send each other messages about meeting up. Cate drifts away from using this app in “Part Three” because her friends and family have been reacting negatively to her appearance and then stays away from it for the rest of the manuscript to avoid a potentially triggering situation where she would see herself as only valuable after modification. This is not meant as an indictment of Snapchat as an app, but rather to show how Cate begins to understand the impacts of social media platforms and draws boundaries for herself—she backs away from Snapchat but continues to use Instagram.

Along with references to social media, *Pretty Delicate* continually comments on millennial struggles that create a unique environment in which eating disorders develop. Preeminent among these struggles is the precarity of economic situations (ie: the impossibility of a balanced budget) against social obligations. Cate and her peers are young adults in a time of huge student debt and living expenses, which contribute to difficulty saving money for down payments on houses or for lavish wedding ceremonies—the traditional markers of reaching adulthood. This means the young women are stuck in a liminal state between being teenagers (and thus, remain reliant on their parents) and being fully functioning adults. For example, Cate starts baking and selling cakes when

people pre-order, but she has no real space of her own in which to do the baking, and so uses first her mother's kitchen, and then later her shared rental kitchen. In this late stage of capitalism, social roles and traditional trajectories break down under the pressure of unsustainability—a fact that surrounds Cate, regardless of whether or not she is consciously aware of this instability.

Pretty Delicate grows out of a matrix of research surrounding eating disorders, their representations, and understandings of approaches to literary craft in order to relay a narrative that implicates social circumstance in both the development and treatment of anorexia. Human beings do not exist within vacuums or voids, but often our faults are seen as if we did—eating disorders appear as a personal failing, not a symptom of collective suffering that can be combatted by increased awareness of these illnesses and the roles that various technologies and discourses have in simultaneously enforcing and subverting their effects. My manuscript is meant as a way of distilling these various factors into a single narrative so that non-specialist readers can identify the multifaceted aspects of millennial experiences and how some of these situations impact individuals more profoundly than others.

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