

ERICKA CLAY

# FAMILY TREE

A POETIC REMEMBRANCE





# Family Tree

A Poetic Remembrance

*Family Tree*

First edition. October 14, 2025.  
Copyright © 2025 Ericka Clay.

Published by Ericka Clay.  
Cover design by Ericka Clay.

*"From now on families will be split apart, three in favor of me, and two against—or two in favor and three against.*

*'Father will be divided against son  
and son against father;  
mother against daughter  
and daughter against mother;  
and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law  
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

(Luke 12:49-56)

Families. In an Eden-esque sense, they're a place of peace and comfort, the ultimate reminder of heaven and who our God is. But then, sin. But then, brokenness. But then, a world that could have been but never was.

But sometimes? Still glimpses.

These poems are from my past, my memories. I could say these are the people and places and events that made me, but that would be wrong. My Lord made me. The things I'm writing about? They were the result of a fallen world, teaching me love in the midst of pain and disappointment.

I pray comfort for you through these poems. If you're all alone and looking around, wishing you, too, had the "perfect" family, don't worry, friend. Those don't exist. But You know who does? The God who loves and cares for you and knew you before time existed.

And what a hopeful, miraculous thing, knowing we will one day be with Him forever.

# Family Tree

How odd it is,  
this demented  
dance back to  
the root of all  
Our misery.  
A poisoned family  
Tree, rotten fruit  
Hanging on by a string  
like my cousin's fingers  
in the door, or the scent  
Of small houses  
in South Texas,  
where the heat ate  
its way in, while  
the devil ate its way  
Out .  
We're connected—you see—  
Cursed abundantly,  
generationally, like  
slapping a stop sign  
Only to catch the ring  
On your finger,  
The literal art of losing  
A part of yourself  
in the process  
Of trying to lose  
it all.  
But what's worse  
is being the scribe  
And knowing too

much and the tedious  
task of never  
Wearing the knowing,  
like a crown,  
lest it break  
my neck.

## Anywhere But Here

I hesitate to go  
back, lest I be  
like Lot's wife,  
a pillar of salt,  
Licked  
and destroyed,  
Or merely blown away?  
And while my grandmother  
Cooks something hot in a pot  
That boils and sets my skin  
In the kitchen,  
Slick with babied fat  
And sweat,  
My three-year-old hand  
reaching out,  
Grabbing the butter  
On the already-set  
table,  
I impale myself  
With my  
Own little pillar—  
Too young  
To look back,  
But never  
Too young  
to placate the desire  
Of "anywhere but here."

# Everything on Paper

The heart of it  
is paper thin  
When the real  
blood and flesh  
Couldn't stand  
each other.  
Or was it  
they loved  
too hard,  
too real,  
That it  
was just  
easier  
to leave  
everything  
on paper?

# Country Boy

What is it

John Denver  
says about thanking  
God he's a country  
boy?

Maybe they'd have  
something to say  
about that,  
working the land  
When the land  
loves you as much  
as the people who own it.  
And maybe they do,  
And you'd know it  
more if that thing  
called flesh wasn't  
always getting in the way.  
You suffered hot nights,  
and human expulsions,  
And a toilet set out  
in the middle of the yard,  
And a rooster clawing  
your face  
And a mountain lion  
nearly killing you  
until your dog saved  
You—  
like a tale  
from all the  
fifth grade books

I ever read.  
Did you lay  
on your back,  
to see ceiling?  
Was it popcorned  
or maybe flat,  
or paneled,  
and did it  
move like a  
movie screen,  
playing your escape,  
breaking free  
from one prison,  
hopefully never  
finding the next?

## A False Start

If she's the fruit  
dangling off this  
limb we've created,  
what does it say  
about our roots?  
Are we watering  
Them?  
Did we nourish  
the soil,  
Or did all the times  
I cried in the closet  
And you worked  
Away a broken  
heart make things  
barren,  
a false start  
for fruit  
that only wishes  
to bloom?

## Close to the Heart

It's always the breasts  
of the women  
I love  
or barely  
knew  
that death takes.  
Flaked and yellowed  
stories of people  
My dad admired  
or my own mother,  
locked in an airtight  
chamber,  
a scientific marvel  
in this still dying  
generation.  
Friends and family  
and beyond that,  
a human linking,  
a genetic degeneration  
within the chest,  
too close to the heart,  
which most likely  
was always meant  
to be the target  
in the first place.

## Primas

They were like witches or fairies,  
or something you tell a young girl  
to keep her captivated, and I was  
thinking about how they hated  
each other, maybe not then,  
but certainly in the now,  
and yet? They were family,  
three, four, five women,  
all cousins, all heated  
by the same familiar  
flame, and together  
they murdered anything  
that stood up or against  
them, and I used to worship  
the thought until You  
made me realize sitting  
as You stand is a much  
place to be.

# Everything As It Should Be

In the jumbled mess  
of who to please,  
like being nine again,  
your father leaving,  
and giving the courtesy  
of hating him, too,  
because what's left  
to love?

But imagine all  
Those pieces  
of despair,  
regret,  
Being put  
back together,  
God's own hand,  
And loving him  
right back  
When he comes  
home again,  
everything  
as it should  
be.

# Renaissance Man

It will always be one  
of those stories  
of how this tainted  
life takes the heroes  
In your head.

I remember most,  
tennis and mustaches,  
and a brilliantly calm  
demeanor I don't think  
I ever saw in a man before.

He knew science and played  
the piano as if you were inside  
the machine, dancing  
on the hammers,  
and ping ponged all of the balls  
in your parents' basement  
every time he'd come to visit,  
your mother's favorite uncle.

He was a man of science, a chemist,  
dancing with the molecules  
that eventually killed him.

And what a slow death that was,  
for him, for everyone who loved  
him.

Because the human in you thinks  
he never deserved death at all,  
but isn't that the lie we feast on?  
He did, just like the rest of us,  
but the golden edge of this story  
is that he loved Jesus, too,

and the hope of knowing  
he's in His arms beats the reality  
of watching your hero waste  
away while the vicious  
sharpen their claws.

## Pure and Clean

Where did the neurotic  
root take water  
in the dirty soil?  
Maybe years before  
Existence was  
blinked into  
the reality  
of all this,  
God knowing  
His creation  
And the dark line  
coloring through it,  
soaking within cell  
to cell, one human,  
then another,  
until the day I  
stood in the doorway  
watching my Granny  
soap her arms up  
to her elbows,  
Doing all she could  
on her own  
to stay pure  
and clean.

## If You Love Him

Maybe it started with Mitzi,  
And the way Uelita  
would tell her to shut up  
because it was the only  
English she knew.  
Or perhaps it trickled  
On to Chiquito—  
alias, Cheeto—  
Who lived to roughly  
twenty or twenty-one  
With my mother who loved  
him.  
But then there was Thomasina,  
a cat, nine-lived and black,  
I think, but can't remember,  
but know I loved the movie  
Because my mother loved  
her cat.  
And then my father  
who's dog was Killer  
and protected him  
from a mountain  
lion, or the story goes,  
and then there was Apollo,  
A dog he met and loved  
when I was already alive  
but then somebody  
poisoned,  
an atrocity, and I'm not  
sure which hit harder—

the thought of somebody  
killing a dog,  
or killing  
my father's  
spirit.

As for me, I lived  
with Fifi, a dainty,  
black toy poodle,  
and a goldfish  
named Goldy  
(I hadn't flexed  
my creative writing  
skills yet so don't  
judge),  
and a time before,  
a Boxer named Sox  
that I had my mother  
give back because  
He liked to eat my  
uniform skirt while  
I was wearing it.  
And then many more,  
particularly dogs  
(and one more  
goldfish, this time,  
"Charlotte"),  
who came to  
Know and love us  
And inevitably trust  
us, which makes  
me think of knowing  
and loving and trusting

God and how all  
things are heartbreaking,  
like when something  
you love so much dies,  
and it feels like your  
spirit dies, too,  
but it never does,  
it never will,  
if you love Him.

# Bruja

I imagine her old  
and dusty,  
although she  
probably wasn't,  
at least not at  
the beginning  
or even in the  
painting somebody  
we know and loved  
hand-stroked  
of her, older  
and knowingly  
seeking  
the youth in my eyes.  
I imagine a broom,  
handmade  
and bottles  
and plants—  
an apothecary  
that knew what  
ails you.  
And there's something  
there in the word  
"bruja,"  
A pride I take  
that needs to be  
spit out  
and trampled on,  
because nothing  
good comes

from witches.  
But what about  
her human heart  
and the tears  
my grandfather  
spilled when she  
was finally  
gone?

## Double Wide

You could make a mud pie  
For nothing at all  
and lock your cousin  
In the shed  
Where no one  
could hear him scream,  
And ride the tractor,  
to your mother's  
discontented heart,  
and watch the men  
Gut and scale fish  
With an electric  
meat carver and watch  
People laugh and love,  
The same ones  
who hated each other  
ten years ago, thinking  
nothing will be different,  
everything will be the same,  
but then it never really is,  
is it?

# Scary

You ever see a real life  
horror  
in the hands and body  
of a man who was once  
beautiful, artistic,  
and lucky in love,  
a dog at his side?  
But then she took  
the dog,  
took his soul,  
and he was left,  
bereft with second best.  
The only issue?  
His perspective.  
And to celebrate,  
He threw a party  
every year in his  
front yard—  
the ghosts and ghouls  
of his past life, breaking  
through ground and everyone,  
even the news crews,  
came to marvel at it.  
And he'd laugh with them,  
beer on his breath,  
urine in the walls—  
the sharp metallic  
smell of his children  
growing fearful of his fear  
that budded and burst

through the floor of their home.

## A Little More Meaningful

Everybody has an uncle  
in the woods  
who lives off the land –  
dead carcasses,  
fresh air,  
stagnant water,  
whiskered fish.  
And even though  
You tell yourself,  
you'd rather have  
your Gameboy  
and Blockbuster  
Friday nights,  
maybe there's just  
that little bit  
that wants the dead,  
the living –  
something a little  
more meaningful  
than what everyone  
says has meaning.

## Love Endures All

He apparently was from a country  
that no longer exists  
to marry a lady who no longer  
does either,  
but when he loved her,  
he loved through  
her anger,  
the hammer strike  
of her madness,  
they way she couldn't  
Love him the same,  
and even though  
I never knew him,  
I knew the people  
who loved him  
deeply,  
the ones who felt  
seen by him,  
even though never  
by her,  
And it makes me think  
of that thing Paul says:  
love endures all.

# Caliente

My aunt was dying  
and lived with us,  
my cousin and I  
swimming in the pool,  
the one covered with netting  
Where the previous  
tenant kept all her  
birds.

It's one of those summers  
kept so vibrantly  
in my mind,  
counterbalanced  
with my aunt's  
loss of taste.

My mom's cousin  
and his wife  
and her kids  
lived with us, too,  
that summer  
and my cousin's wife  
made food so spicy  
my aunt could taste it,  
and what a gift,  
a little blessing  
You sent in the hot  
Texas heat, that we  
could all share, no matter  
the color of our skin,  
or the state of its  
decay.

# Too Slippery to Grip

Like father,  
like son,  
like watching  
the bomb be set  
years ago,  
only for it to blow  
up in your face now.  
I imagine a romantic  
roam across the border,  
A midnight stealing  
into somebody else's  
country to come and conquer  
it for yourself.  
But reality is never as good  
as the past,  
where dirt floors never existed  
or the broom you use to sweep them.  
But from them both came a man  
who ended up just like his father,  
or maybe something a little more  
watered down.  
How would I know?  
I never lived with the demon  
inside his chest, the one who  
yearned to dominate  
from a place too slippery  
to grip.  
But then he grew and married,  
my grandmother no less,  
And even later on than that,

I came along to love him,  
sitting on the side of his  
recliner,  
sipping warm beer  
from his bottle caps,  
marveling at the darkness  
of his skin, the lightness  
in mine,  
Knowing we were connected,  
and praying the warmth  
Of the beer would lull  
our dark demon  
to sleep.

## Jaded DNA

What's bigger?

The jaded DNA  
that connects my  
curses to the ones  
generationally  
previous to mine  
or the God  
who created  
my crystalline  
code-  
so neat,  
so pure,  
and still  
waiting  
for me  
if I want  
it?

## Get Your Free Books!

Ericka Clay

E R I C K A C L A Y . C O M

1

Join my mailing list at [erickaclay.com](http://erickaclay.com)<sup>2</sup> to receive my emails in your inbox and download my free books and resources. There's no charge and no obligation.

---

1. <http://erickaclay.com>
2. <http://erickaclay.com>

