

ERICKA CLAY

FAMILY TREE

A P O E T I C R E M E M B R A N C E



Family Tree

A Poetic Remembrance

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"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?

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