



Snapped

A short book of poetry by Ericka Clay.

This is a creative work. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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A short collection of poetic snapshots of women who are silently battling societal expectations and greatly desiring to be set free.

Everly

Outside was always prettier,
Everly with her steady hand,
Painting her face with a notch-deep desire,
Space one, then space two, and on it went
Until the notches ran inward, losing count
Of each tick.

It was waking up after a deep long sleep,
A blackout, and there her face—a pretty little
Picture of who she never was and never will be.
But men are stupid, so she thinks, but really,
Men are just good at denying the truth, which really
Isn't unique to men at all.

When the work was done, it was time to dress,
Which took a little less blackout, but still,
A separation from all that was reality.
A separation from what was deeply wanted
And what something inside all of us deeply
Expects.

All together she looked like everything she
Always knew she would as a girl, playing
One Barbie against the other,
And imagining her muscles and skin
So smooth and long and limber enough
To be the thing she always imagined.
The thing she saw now in the mirror,
But could barely even feel.

Valerie

There was a little pocket
Of time, crumb-filled
And at a lonely disadvantage,
Where she took to combing online for inspiration,
But all she found was the detritus of moments
Past, the people and places who lived out life
To such an advantage, they didn't need to call
Themselves poets.

One such crumb, Troy, was the door she never walked
Through, although her toes had been on the threshold.
Now sticky-faced twins and a wife who's trained
Her face to be Facebooked, Troy stands like a lone
Appendage against their collective small body.

Valerie puts herself in the woman's place,
But there's a gap and shadow in her brain.
All she's known for a good long time is the pleasant
Loneliness, quietness of words that don't expect
Her to smile when the camera flashes, and a life
Where no camera is desired at all.

"It could have been grand," she mutters along
As she listlessly makes her way through old
Classmates, knowing what a lie that is
To the heart God crafted to span the truth
Like bird wings—majestic but just as delicate
To the touch.

Avery

Convinced, Avery sat with the yellowed
Sears catalogue in her lap, her mother's
Instruction still nasally in her ear.
"This is what we'd use to order what we wanted."
Curious at who the "we" were and the no-show
That was "needed," Avery imagined a world
Where she could order what she wanted too.
Maybe a man who knew a door only for coming in
Instead of going out. Maybe a man whose only goal
Was to gray with time and sag as she sagged
And to laugh at all the memories and moments
That led up to the visual decay because what else
Can you do but laugh at death?
Instead, she had known men who walked
Through the revolving "out" door, and laughed
Only at her sagging and sad attempt to stuff
Everything into a skin-tight girdle, a trussed turkey,
As they found that door and loitered in a world
Avery was never invited to. She picked at the pages,
Yellowed with time and all the wanting of the collective
"We" and heard her mother's "See how they leave you?"
And Avery never would give the slightest indication
That maybe there was something more there
Even her mother didn't know.

Trixie

Trixie hated eyes, the concept of them, and the fact
That they were always attached to other people.
She could feel the way they sorted and categorized her,
Pinning her between “plain-faced” and “maybe a boy?”
Her hair mushroomed a halo around her head,
And she kept black, thick-framed glasses on her face
Because poking herself in the eye every morning
Seemed barbaric.

She sat next to nobody at Miner’s only bus stop,
Her town small enough to have one way in
And one way out.

It was two a.m., and her phone
Was an homage to the “too little, too late.”

Trixie, please. Please answer. I am so sorry. I love you, baby.
Her mother’s flair for the sentimental like a random outbreak
of a dormant disease. It almost worked. Almost.

But how could that woman claim love when her whole life was work
And men? Her mom lived half her life in ugly white sneakers,
Cleaning off old men and listening to old women refuse to die.
The other half was with “Tim,” who really could be anyone
On any given evening. The type of addiction Trixie almost
Wished more fatal like a final dose of fentanyl.

At least I could mourn her, she thought.

But she moved the thought out as quickly as it
Had moved in.

She replaced it with Derek
who had stolen his brother’s car, fled
Raleigh and was heading to a state
Where he’d never been to meet a girl
He’d have to sort and categorize

And who was willing to be anyone
At this point, as long as she wasn't
Her mother.

Karen

In the 90's, there was a taste for it,
An almost overgrown zeal she took
To whacking away like weeds:
Her love of teaching.
She reasoned its roots lost water
And shriveled because she was an old
Maid now-thirty-five—but that couldn't
Be it. By the looks of things on her TV,
Thirty-five was the new twenty.
It was more of a shift that didn't even
Start within her own heart. It was outward
And everywhere and the way the new janitor
Slid his eyes over his neatly trimmed
Nails when she confirmed her name
Was Karen. Apparently, she had become
A nomenclatural pariah without even
Becoming aware of it.
All day long she taught children who looked
More at their screens than her face. That wasn't
Education, but the complaint was a faded tune
In her principal's ears. Education now consisted
Of a laborious list of all the things she intended to do
But couldn't quite pull off.
Like when she wanted to teach *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*
And the collective gasp in her teacher's meeting
Seemed like a response to her wanting to light the children on fire.
Too racist, too many curse words (although she was sure
Some of her kids ate those for breakfast), too...real.
That night Karen went home, took a long bubble
Bath and remembered something she hadn't deemed

Worth remembering for a long time.
There she'd been, young and alone in her room—
The best combination—long wooden ruler in hand,
Teaching the doll she'd named after herself,
Instructing her on the ways of the world
She'd one day cease to know.

Gail

It wasn't like she was any fatter
Than anyone else in the group
Who told her thinness was next
To godliness. This from women
Who watched the low-fat Oreos
On their plates rather than eat them.
At first, Gail had admired their self-
Control but now she ached at their
Self-regret and the way it snaked
Her colon, lone and haunting through
A gut that hadn't eaten.
Long ago was she the "other" Gail,
The one her sister and mother
Teased her about because they were
Just as fat but had always been, suffering
Through watching a sister and daughter
Who was beautiful and small
And acted as if this would always
Be the gift that kept on giving.
But the gift curdled, milk in Gail's
small-town glass, giving birth
to a daughter the day after
Graduation and being one
Of the "lucky" ones
Whose boyfriends didn't stray.
Todd was a good man. Gail knew
That in the way his breath was on her
Shoulder at night, his gaze looking
farther into her than anyone else's
Ever had.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Bean”
he’d say, the “string” always implied
Ages past when she was a tiny thing
Next to his six-one frame.

When he kissed her, he really kissed her
From a place born beyond desire
And for an instant, she almost
heeded his call.

But sitting in a cold metal chair,
Seeing all these ladies and thinking
About her daughter, Brianna, small-
boned and delicately crafted
at four-years-old, the thought
made contact: *Shouldn’t I be
better?*

And for a short moment, Gail
Pretended she was the wife
Her husband craved and the mother
Who was the type to get up and leave
For a daughter who didn’t deserve
To know “once upon a time” always
Seemed to trump the beautiful
Gift of “right now.”
But instead, she ate the Oreo
To keep from fainting.

Jeanine

She was old and everything hurt,

But she made her mouth work

Against the pain.

“Elbow grease,” she spat at the dark-

Haired one who looked like she could

Fit inside Jeanine’s pocket. She didn’t

Fault her on her small shape, the eyes

Like two almonds, opened and always

Slightly confused and a mouth like

A cherry to its sundae. In fact, Jeanine

Felt sorry for this girl who was by all

Intents and purposes too beautiful

For words but just as stupid.

A waste, really, that’s what it was.

The girl, Carmen, was what happened

When bad luck wanted to make a fool

Of you. She crouched and cleaned the oven,

More like moved the burnt gristle from one

Side of its inner belly to the other,

And Jeanine sighed, thankful she only

Had one son who hadn’t done something

Foolish like have a child who was doomed

To clean some other person’s appliances.

She wouldn’t dare say it at the center though.

“Still working at my age,” she was always saying to Ray

Who liked to play cards in the big room with the skylights.

She’d sit with him, the ladies chatting nearby

In a circle that both irritated and intrigued Jeanine.

She had always been the odd one out, trailing her brothers

On the farm, her brothers who barely acknowledged

Her presence, but it was better than standing in the kitchen
With her mother and her sisters who always gave her dirty
Looks behind her mother's back.

She fished for raised eyebrows, a look
Of mild fascination but the women stuck
To their cackles and knitting that
Made Jeanine's knuckles ache
Just by watching.

At least, Jeanine thought, I'm my own boss,
Acknowledging what those ladies at the senior
Center couldn't understand—that there was some
Good to be had, even in somebody else's
Kitchen, even with knees that screamed
As she crouched down to Carmen's level
To show her how it was done.

Annie

It happened like her mother
Said it would, before
She could even stop to take
A breath.

Three under three, in fact,
Three all two-triplets
Convening in the kitchen
To kill her.

Brad would say she's being absurd.
"The kids don't want to kill you, Annie,"
He'd muse, plucking a beer from the back
Of the fridge and going to see who
He could blow to smithereens
On Fortnite.

Brad found life so easy
That Annie hated the way
She hated him.

It wasn't fair to him—
A man-boy coddled
By one woman, only
To grow up and find
Another woman willing
To do the same.

He was only being who everyone
Groomed him to be.

It's not worth the fight,
Annie would often think, whether
rubbing a Mr. Clean Eraser raw
Against the crayon
on her grayish-beige walls

Or picking at matted Cheerios
from her carpet.

At night, or more like early morning,
With Brad snoozing and the triplets
Comatose after a day of expelling
Every ounce of their energy,
Annie would watch her ceiling,
A blank, white background,
Pretending to blast one wrong
Choice after another
With a futuristic rifle
Until the only thing left—
The reality of another new
Day.

Brandy

The trick was going slow
And watching Pete's hands
As he firmly chunked iceberg
Into bits of salad she'd reluctantly
Eat later. This was the kind of thing
They all liked, talking about their mothers
Or their maids forcing them to eat their
Greens once upon a time. And Brandy
Went to a faraway nowhere place
Where something even remotely close
Would have happened like that.
But her stomach fought her convoluted
Notions of "the perfect life," and she
Had to blink through a hungry desire
For ramen and Kool-Aid.
Jean moved into the kitchen, floated
In her small, nymph-like way,
And suddenly the hunger became
A longing to be longer limbed and lithe,
To be anything but the thick-ankled girl-woman
Attempting to butcher lettuce next to a man
Who smelled like an expense she couldn't afford.
"You look fun," Jean said in her sincere way
That made Brandy feel like a Thanksgiving blimp.
"Thank—" was all that made its way out into the ether
Because Jean had sharply changed course, her eye
On Pete who had moved on to the dressing.
Brandy watched them, like characters in a movie
She was only recently permitted to watch,
And for all the discomfort she felt as their eyes

Sized each other, and their hands played close
To the cutting board, she forced herself to know
And understand what she wasn't, what she never
Would be as her heart-felt punishment for living.

Kayla

It was the sadness in her own heart
That she covered with the stories
She always told.

Ben was always doing well,
Going the extra mile, making the boss smile,
And who knew who else, but Kayla never said
That part.

And Gwen was such a gift from God Himself,
She could pinch herself—how lucky—to be given
A little piece of heaven to hold in her own arms.
Sometimes, at night, the story became the real
Truth instead of the daughter growing older, her
Arms growing longer and pushing Kayla out
Into the quiet of a bedroom Ben would never
Get around to paint.

There were swatches she had swiped from Home Depot
And dropped into her purse to pull out during
Bibles and Beverages, the much joked-about name
Of the Wednesday morning study group Kayla attended
With all the other young thirty-something mothers,
Sipping coffee and complaining about the hard
That came with a life lived in real-time without
The protective bubble of their online sub-realities,
But never Kayla. She wasn't weak. She was better,
Different than the rest who seemed to shove their truth
Right on the table next to the half-eaten croissants
And wadded up napkins, forcing her to process
A mouthful of their pain when she could never even
Stand to take a bite of her own.

Cantrell

Cantrell was named after the street she was born
On, in a big white house where the neighborhood
Would come to see the Christmas lights and take
Giant candy canes her mother always ordered
in bulk.
They were the “rich family,” the ones
Who were blessed with wealth even though
Cantrell could never fully verbalize the curse
In that particular blessing.
Everyone around her lived it up, especially Lizzie,
Her younger sister prancing around in her tennis whites,
When she didn’t even play tennis,
The grass court at the back of the house
Having started to sprout weeds.
What they don’t tell you is that money
Doesn’t satisfy death,
That it still comes for you
As you’re sitting there in your room
Minding your own business
With *Little Women* splayed on your lap
And your grandmother darkens
Your doorway with the news
That your family has died
In a car wreck and all
Your heart can muster up
Is the thought of candy canes
And weeds.

Eleanor

Her pearls were set to choke her,
The strand biting into the flesh
that had fattened over time.
It was hard for Eleanor, the “pretty one,”
To slip on the icey surface of that epithet
And not watch her massive body
Come crashing down.
Every day, brown pocketbook cramped
in her armpit, red lips painted thickly
With a shaking hand,
She went to the bank, the grocery store,
Waiting to hear what hadn’t been said
In a string of forevers.
She wasn’t pretty anymore.
She knew that much.
But it wasn’t the knowing,
It was the holding it so close,
it could become a part of her—
The entirety of her large
Frame and soulful eyes—
Because maybe pretty,
She thought as nobody
Whistled her way,
never should have been
my point in the first place.

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