



# Snapped

A short book of poetry by Ericka Clay.



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*Snapped*

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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 icy 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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