



# BOTTOMLAND

ERIN ELKINS RADCLIFFE

# Bottomland: A Poem

Erin Elkins Radcliffe

—For my family

*If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.*

— Ecclesiastes 11:3-4

## **Bottomland**

At the seam the first light of day makes, two burying beetles slide under the body of a blackbird. The bird's chest stiffens around the song it once spilled, rusty and pleated, over every field.

The beetles inter the bird's tail, feet, and red-yellow epaulets in earth: slowly, precisely.

Here the sextons mate, dropping their jeweled and teeming eggs into the empty sockets of the blackbird's eyes.

^

*Directly – drekley. I'll get to that drekley.*

Says the button box. Says the hymn and then the  
sweetener: *swing low*.

Says the creek of its single flooding, says the pastor.  
Says the rain, says the crop, says the river, and the  
railroad trestle, stripped of rail.

Says the woman, says the man. Says the word, says life.  
Says the after.

^

In late April, seed corn rests, nascent in bushel bags.  
This first baby is overdue, past ready to be born.

Overhead, the moon wheels half toward Easter, half back  
toward the certain sleep of winter. At the table, the talk  
is corn or baby.

Father and grown son plant the corn, drive the woman  
into town after.

^

At the hospital, the woman's womb is plumb,  
sarcophagal.

In the fields, the corn disgorges, fat with moraine. The  
child is overdue, the corn is early – a month at least.

An X-ray maps a living ghost, the bones within bones the  
woman shelters. Above her, the doctor's scalpel glistens  
with the certainty of the plow.



^

Do we all sleep through our own birth?

When they pull him out, the boy's arms are crossed tight against his chest like a pharaoh's. Time and again, the woman uncrosses them, only to have him draw them back to center.

A long wail: a nurse slaps the mother's bottom, jarring the breasts where her milk turns to cake.

A smudge of rust on white cotton: the baby's umbilicus detaches like some ancient fingernail.

^

At home, the child is swaddled, rearranged. Hampers fill with diapers, nipped bottles with formula and steam.

The clothesline out back is taut, fastened to the floor of a lost inland sea.

The strip of creek behind the house gurgles with mossy rock and crawdads, crinoids like shattered columns of spine.

Across town, the woman's mother dies: all manner of things get lost.

^

The woman's stitches heal in the space of a calendar year. Then there is one child and then another: black-haired, red-haired, brown-eyed, and well-fed — haranguing for C7 lettuce, the Coca Cola in the bigger bottles.

The woman's chickens always wander out into the road: she could never be bothered with a pen.

Because who else would clean up after them and whose lungs — like her mother's — would fill with their filth?

And who but she would wring their necks and draw the feathers, one by ragged one, from their scalded, puckered skin?

^

In the spring, bluebells swell under the Monon railway trestle. Dogwood and redbuds shade the siltstone where a single whippoorwill lingers.

Mother and children fill a basket with pokeweed, lamb's quarters, and ramps. The youngest boy skips stones across a square quarry pond. Dodder and winter creeper fall over the tipped grave of a Union colonel.

A postcard from the woman's childhood of an Indiana white-tailed deer, in a zoo, leans against the mantle — inscription *1 of 3 remaining, 1930*:

The world, entire, that once dangled in the unbruised, unseen fruit of a mayapple.

^

Tassels swing thickly from corn, an agitated grass.

The oldest boy's final chore is to fill the rows so  
resolutely with human stink that no animal will steal.  
Row by row, his bare feet plod the field with the scent of  
blue john, gym, and sweat.

But the nimble fingers of raccoons shred the corn's  
golden silk, and their jaws fill with kernels in the long  
and odorless light of the moon.

^

The woman didn't notice them until after she had brought the first load of wash into the shed: a nest of barn swallows – a tangle of mud and mouths, streaming with a strand of her or the girl's red hair.

When she came back, the swallows bobbed in the zinc tub: their still-gaped beaks slack, nest capsized.

She would tell the children that if she had known the nest was going to fall, she would not have gone back inside for the last of the load.

But what is and was always next is that the woman gathers the birds' bodies in her hands and buries them, under a lilac, with the smooth scoop of her daughter's china tea cup – then goes back to the shed to hang the man's work shirts, unwrung and sodden, up to dry.

^

In late summer, a reddish calf slides, wet and slick, onto the matted straw of the barn. His mother chews the afterbirth outside the faint circle of light off the kerosene lamp. The man puts out his cigarette: the ends of his fingers are crescents of black earth.

Who could say if he was a hard man. When a child needed whipping, he made the child cut his own switch from the tree. All the church's noise roared – or went mute – inside him.

That year's calf grew fat in the mucky pasture, but swallowed metal before he could become a steer. He could not eat or drink – just stood, dry-eyed and gaping, at the door to the barn.

Eyes down then, the man puts a hammer in the boy's hand and tells him, "Here now – you're gonna have to do it," before he walks on back to the house.

There is no other world but this one and not nearly enough sacrament, thick-tongued or wafer-thin, to go around. The hammer's face is cold and finite, and the boy's fingers are outspread and then drawn tight to center, around the too-heavy handle.

^

A polecat. A bobwhite. The persimmons and the PCBs. The Spirit that did or did not, in the end, find the man — depending on who you ask. I reckon so. I don't reckon.

The mantle clock, wound by key. The 1953 encyclopedia. The Christmas tree nailed to the living room floor, the Delco house. The hand pump, a shovelful of clinkers. The milk can. The beans and pickles put up in jars. The dirt daubers, the glance of rain: the stopper, the gap in the fence, the thread on the bobbin, the quilt tops, folded on the shelf.

Tobacco curing in a neighbor's barn, but still drawing welts in my father's skin.

The red geraniums, potted on a limestone porch. The lattice of cobbler, the banty hens: their feathers and their brains. The stone mill, the switchboard. Stenography, a hangnail: overtake.

Reckon and reckon and reckon it all.



^

The clean lines of the barn and the house betray no hesitation: in the shed, the awl, the hammer, and the wrenches cling neatly to their places.

Here is the steady movement of food from root and seed to vein and flower — from dirt to mouth to dirt again.

Here are the potatoes planted on Good Friday, their eyes glistening as corn bloats in lye. Here's a rind, a remainder, the sacks of summer squash and Brandywines to gift to a neighbor and not to waste.

Here are shards of arrowheads, flint and chert, the gills of fish run cold with polychlor. Turpentine for the chilblains these children never had, the unseen thing that might clabber the milk. The river and creek overrun with rain —

The ropes our own viscera might make if they were long enough to hang.

^

Green rainwater stands in buckets lining the shed,  
seeding the light with mosquitoes that fill and swell with  
our own hidden blood.

Hidden, a bobwhite calls from beyond the field: he will  
call then, but I will never see one before we all  
disappear —

Years later, a jay new to feathers lights so close it's hard  
to tell who's more startled when he darts back to the  
shelter of a skinny tree — planted in a subdivision that  
was once the hayfield a dead neighbor never did take  
very good care of.

^

Always a dog in the foreground of every photograph, but hardly ever the same dog. The farm, the fields, the barn: leased, then sold, and sold again – offset and then braided into an interstate.

Inside the walls of a green house in front of a muddy creek, the back bedroom once pulsed with bees.

At night, the buzzing of queen to nurse to drone. Month after month, the family listened – as they woke and as they slept – but the hive was impossible to reach as wax and bees and comb filled the spaces between the sheeted-over logs and plaster.

Because to extract them was to destroy the only sweetness we could keep.

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