

Loose of Earth

Kathleen Dorothy Blackburn

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About faith, family, and an informal investigation into carcinogenic toxins, Kathleen Dorothy Blackburn's memoir *Loose of Earth* is wrenching.

Blackburn grew up in Texas surrounded by cotton fields. Her family was religious; their church was their second home. Her parents were Reagan-era born-again Christians whose home lessons reinforced their theology. Indeed, creationism and "God-planning" were on the curriculum instead of evolution or sex education, and corporal punishment was the norm. Evangelistic revivals reiterated that they should trust in supernatural healing.

Told in the present tense, the book recreates Blackburn's childhood perspective alongside flashbacks into her parents' and grandparents' lives. Blackburn longed to be a veterinarian like her mother, who worked part-time and home-schooled her five children. Blackburn, the eldest, often babysat her siblings. Then, in 1998, her father, a pilot for American Airlines, was diagnosed with colon cancer; he died when he was thirty-nine.

Though cancer ran in the family, Blackburn later learned of another potential cause of her father's illness. On this topic, the book weaves in research in a natural way, positing that toxins contained in the military-grade firefighting foam used at nearby Reese Air Force Base contaminated the groundwater and increased local cancer rates.

"I believe[d] Dad's illness [was] a test of our faith, a suffering with purpose," Blackburn writes. Her family followed a strict diet, cutting out sugar and processed foods and baking their own bread, leading to spiritual struggles over food and pain. When her father's parents brought their dying son Oreos, for example, Blackburn's mother wouldn't allow him even one. And Blackburn expresses regret that codeine was withheld from him as a sign of faith in healing.

Loose of Earth is a poignant memoir—at once a family story and a bold exposé of the lasting effects of "forever chemicals."

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