Coal Dust Stains Never Wash Out

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Assignment Description: Choose one of three books of poetry that were read in class and write about a topic of your choice.

The word ‘patchwork’ inevitably triggers an automatic mental reaction for most people when they hear it. The typical reaction, probably unsurprisingly, is to either think of the word ‘quilt’, or to simply form a mental picture of such a blanket. When broken into other words, however, it literally means ‘pieced work,’ and could be defined as any collection of several smaller pieces fitted together to form a larger design. While most often used in conjunction with needlework, there could be no metaphor more fitting for the collaboration of voices that come together to tell the story of what it truly means to be a mining community.

In her book Kettle Bottom, Fisher has created a collection of poems that can easily be disassembled and deconstructed individually without losing anything that particular piece has to say. Each piece, or patch, is as beautifully made as the next. Each patch has its own story to tell, and indeed every one of them tells it well, for “these are the stories of the men who descend into the mines and the women and children who wait for them to emerge at the end of each shift” (Macdonald). As brilliant as these stories are individually, none can compare with the collaboration of these voices and the story they tell when brought together into the completed collection, a masterfully designed patchwork quilt.

“Fisher hastens her way to the voices that steer ‘Kettle Bottom’ by electing often to cast her pieces as letters and journal and diary entries” (Parnass), and through such methods, we are able to glean intimate knowledge of the daily struggles that persist in a mining community. We are privy to thoughts that would have otherwise gone unexpressed, and permitted to see an exchange between two people that might never have passed farther that those two, were it not woven into something bigger than they. The thoughts and opinions of the children in the community are more difficult to extract and weave in, but Fisher manages to do this seamlessly by using some of the previously described methods, newspaper interviews, and even book reports.

The first voice we hear belongs to that of Maude Stanley, who is a twenty-three year old woman who recognizes one of her men by a patch that she had sewn on his shirt. Though she does not tell how this man is related to her, Maude describes why the women of a mining town must study their men so closely. Hers is the voice of every mother, daughter, sister, and wife who has found herself powerless to change the circumstances in which her family must live. There is little, if anything, that these women could do except learn how to reclaim whomever the mines took from them. Chosen as the first poem to serve as an anchor, this patchwork square would likewise be embroidered with a bold stitch and color choice, and would be placed near the heart of the quilt.

The next voice that is added to the tapestry is that of an Italian immigrant worker. Though we do not yet know how he comes to be working in this community, his feelings about the work he does in the mines is quite clear. Though the phenomenon known as ‘kettle bottom’ is often given as the reason for mining-related deaths, this worker does not know what the term means. This suggests an unfamiliarity with mining, leaving questions as to why he is working there to begin with. It is through his voice that we are provided an explanation for the term, and his rejection of their definition and subsequent substitution of an expression of his own choosing is telling.

In a different square, on the other side of the patchwork quilt, there is another patch quilted in similar style, as though stitched by the same
hand. The voice of the Italian man has returned to complete his story by explaining how he has come to be there. His father has brought them to America to look for stone to chisel into creations as beautiful as Michelangelo’s David. Instead, “when the train stops, they give papa not a chisel, but a shovel. He shakes his head, no, no, no --but we already owe for the train.” (Fisher 82). When his father dies with their debt unpaid, there is no choice for his son but to take his father’s place in the tunnels. He arrives at the mine, asks about this term, “kettle bottom” that he keeps hearing, and we are back to square one.

The corners of this quilt are anchored with the strength of sisterly love and weather-treated with sage advice to prevent fraying as long as possible. An unnamed woman sends letters to her younger sister, Hazel, advising her against marrying a man who has taken to the mines “like a fish to water” (Fisher 9). Citing personal experience, the older sister strongly advises her to walk away “Hazel, for the sake of your own sweet soul,” because the coal gets deeply into everything after a while, even into one’s soul. She is desperately trying to prevent her younger sister from making the same mistakes that she had, and ending up living the same kind of life.

The next letter to Hazel from her sister indicates that Hazel had neglected, or was unable, to heed the advice her sister had given her, and was not only married, but also with child. Once again, she gives advice to her sister, even more chilling than the last. She advises Hazel to take anything of value to their mother’s house because the company was known to enjoy breaking things when they evicted people from their company-owned homes. She ends by saying “as for the other thing you ask, Hazel, the answer is this: three tables of sugar and turpentine” (Fisher 27). This patch certainly has enough power to have earned its corner anchoring position.

The final letter comes to Hazel following the Matewan Massacre in May of 1920, and in this letter begs Hazel not to come there to visit because of all the danger. The mayor, seven company agents, and two miners were killed in a violent gun battle following an unsuccessful attempt by the company to evict mining families. In the weeks after the gunfight, both sides responded with increased violence, and “the days of guerilla warfare that ensued are known as the Battle of Blair Mountain” (Fisher 2). Hazel’s sister tells her firmly that she should not come there, though she misses her greatly. She warns her that the entire camp has become like a mine with a hollow roof, and hidden just out of view “that old kettle bottom is waiting to drop” (Fisher 67).

Edith Mae Chapman is nine years old and in the fourth grade, and has a couple patches of her own to add to the quilt. Her first piece comes in the form of a diary entry, in which she writes that her teacher has given her the diary so that she has a place to tell her secrets. She describes how every few months some ladies from a church send a mission box, which is mostly “a big lot of nothing cant nobody use, but last time...it was all coats” (Fisher 11). She writes about how she longs for a certain coat, but knows she cannot ask for it. When she gets that coat, she finds a note in the pocket from the previous owner of the coat which says that she, Edith Mae is poor. She decides to keep the note a secret; possibly to maintain the innocence her parents are not ready to give up.

When next we hear from Edith Mae, she is being interviewed by a reporter from New York, who asks her what her daddy says about the strike. She says that she is not to go into the company store, go to school where she would have to listen to the company teacher, or go to church and listen to the company preacher. Literally everything in this town, from the houses to the stores, is owned by the company and can be taken away from the miners any time they were accused of stepping out of line. “And we ain’t to talk to God. My daddy is very upset with the Lord” (Fisher 57). These people have essentially given up hope that there was any salvation in their future.

There is a third square quilted by the same hand, though it would not be distinguishable were the initials of its creator not stitched in a discreet corner of each patch. For although it resembles the other two squares in format, the content is different and the threadwork is of higher quality, as though the seamstress had honed her skill considerably between patches. Edith Mae is again using a diary entry to add her voice, however this time she speaks with a wisdom that was only hinted at previously.
She begins by confessing that her father has scolded her for eavesdropping because, she repeats, “there is things...little girls ain’t meant to understand” (Fisher 61). This comment reveals that her father is aware that his daughter is intelligent enough to understand what she hears when she overhears adults talking. When he explains that “a man...has got to make a stand and say which side he’s on” (61), she agrees that they “ain’t on the side of no scabs” (61), because she knows that is the response that is expected of her. However, Edith Mae admits to the pages of her diary that her true sympathy lies with the trees, which she insightfully points out, have never asked to be on either side, but are brought into the battle anyway. Perhaps Edith Mae can easily sympathize with these trees because she has found herself in a similar position.

There are voices of other children woven in as well, those who have lost their fathers, uncles, or older brothers already, and those still waiting for that day to come. In a mining community such as this, a young boy might hesitate to choose a role model, for fear of a cave in, or some other, equally horrible disaster which would steal his hero away. Robert Davis explains that the company agents evict families “when their Daddy joins the union or gets killed in the mine” (Fisher 69), which is especially distasteful information coming from the mouth of a fourth grade child. The voices of the children are impossible to ignore because they are unable to sugar coat the realities of what living in a mining town is like, the way the adults are able to do in pretense.

There are a couple of flaws in the quilt, notably the square with the slightly crooked seams that was stitched by Walter Coyle, a fifth grader, who has been “a little touched...ever since his uncle Joe...got sealed in Layland” (Fisher 33). Walter’s story is a unique and interesting one due to the extremity of his reactions to a common mining town occurrence. The loss of a family member is something that nearly every person in the town has experienced, yet none of the other quilters have a reaction similar to Walter’s, who “don’t never sleep no more nor hardly eat enough to keep a bird alive, as his mama says” (33). Perhaps most noticeable in contrast is the difference between Walter and other children, who somehow manage to stitch a wonderfully straight seam.

Far away from Walters square, and therefore quite unaware of his errant seams, Miss Terry has patches of her own to add. Like Edith Mae she expresses herself through diary entries, though being older she prefers to call it a journal. Miss Terry is the school teacher who has been hired by the company and is therefore expected to be a dislikable person. However, in her first journal entry she begins by describing her “thoughts and nerves and senses” as “pieces of broken glass tumbling in a kaleidoscope” (Fisher 14), which makes an emotional impact right away. Like fancy beadwork that catches the eye, Miss Terry writes in a way that draws the eye to the words that are emotionally charged, which makes her feelings about living in this town easy to translate.

Miss Terry has an important story to relate, one that would be close to the heart of this quilt. Her journal entry in December of 1920 is in keeping with the style of her previous work, however instead of disclosing her own feelings she is narrating an extremely significant event. Following a particularly bad roof collapse, Nathan Stokes was reported missing. His lunch pail was passed through a small opening in the rocks and then through the crowd hand to hand until it reached his wife Gertie. “She did not speak, only turned the bucket upside-down -- the miners way to signal strike” (Fisher 56). Being a company employee, Miss Terry is removed from the emotion of the situation on a personal level, and in this case she is merely describing what she sees.

Interestingly, it is through a square quilted by the hand of a man named Henry Burgess that the truth about the strike is revealed. It is as though he is aware that there are ends of an unfinished story somewhere in these threads that must be tied off in order to keep them from unraveling. He begins by describing his feelings about going back into the mine and his reasons for doing so. He then explains the truth about the strike, using information he was privy to because, unlike Miss Terry, he is not removed from the situation, he is part of it. Gertie Stokes admitted to Mary Burgess that she had not intended to start a strike when she turned Nathan’s lunch pail over the day of the collapse. Mary then told
her husband, who warned her not to tell anybody else so as not to undermine the little bit of pride the strike had generated among the men.

Each patch must be retrieved from whomever stitched it, carefully assembled so as to showcase each the best way possible. Voices get double-stitched and loose threads need to be researched, retied, and wound back onto the bobbin. The Pearlie Webb has been used nearly to completion, for few threads bind as strongly and last as long as she. The seamstress may critique her new creation with satisfaction, for this is no mere vanity spread. Though the beauty of the quilt is obvious, so too are the coal-dust handprints that permeate the fabric, staining the beautiful design with a sadness that cannot be washed away.