The Women Who Wait
By Sheri Spagnola

Assignment Description: Write a paper about a book that was read in class on a topic of your choice.

Author's note: The inspiration to write a narrative prose poem after reading Kettle Bottom by Diane Gilliam Fisher, at first, made no connection with my own more privileged childhood. By the end of the book my thought processes had changed. I decided to write my own narrative poem and explain before each stanza how and why I wrote what I did. All references to inspired poems are from the text Kettle Bottom to simplify the writing. My poem is in Arial Narrow Font to differentiate it from my remarks on Gilliam Fisher’s works and is not indented. My verse is also from the view of a woman seamstress and my observations are from a feminist viewpoint in contrast with the masculine.

In the article, Histories of Feminist Ethnography, as quoted by the author “Edward Tylor addressed the Anthropological Society of Washington in 1884, ‘when he held that “the man of the house, though he can do a great deal, cannot do it all!”’ (Visweswaran 597). I would argue that men were expected to go out to work to meet the strictly physical demands set by societal standards and, yes, men could not do it all, but it is sometimes unclear whether it was by obligations or choice. The women performed the bulk, if not all the rest of the family obligations in the early 20th century also by those same principles.

In this case, I intend to show in a coal mining town how the emotional burden was placed on the women and used the theme of “fabric” from the verse in the book “Explosion at Winco No. 9” (Gilliam-Fisher 7). Women were the ones who sewed, a task that resonated with femininity and “... evokes ideas about thrift, housekeeping, wifely duty, motherly love, and sexual attraction” (Gordon 68). Sewing was a survival skill performed out of economic and social need in the coal mining town and expected gender roles, implying dire circumstances dictate the women had no other choice than to sew, and patch together their clothing and their family (Gordon 68-71).

First, I was inspired by “Pearlie Tells What Happened at School” (Gilliam-Fisher 33), because this touching and highly moving poem broke my heart. It was then I decided to tell my own story of a family with no hope and no recourse to change what direction their lives took. In the second stanza of “Pearlie Tells What Happened at School,” where the little boy brings rocks to school, he asks Miss Terry, his teacher, if a person can get petrified. I saw this not only in the literal sense of Joe Coyle, his father being petrified as rock (in death,) just as a tree becomes a “kettle bottom,” but as a petrification of a woman’s soul, static and unmoving. They become living statues when their very lives are petrified and their actions are automatic and unsurprising. However, an undercurrent of love and beauty runs through this entire chapbook, seemingly defying and (to use a cliché) spitting in the face of fate.

Dirty Laundry: The Fabric of a Coal Miner’s Life

The little boy in a dull white shirt plays outside. He giggles and runs toward a grey-black tree for he must touch it before his sister clad in a formerly lemon-yellow dress catches up with him and he becomes “it.” The game is played almost every day with her in her long brown braids and the legs of a foal just born and learning to walk. She has never caught him before he touches the tree, but today is different. It will rain and he looks up to see the thunderclouds. It is too late. He has been tagged. His face twists to surprise. She is younger and smaller, yet she has done it for the first time. Drops of rain polka dot his
shirt and her dress. He grabs her arm and runs toward their drab home.

When I read the poem entitled, “The Rocks Down There,” the quote, “The rocks down here, they don’t expect nobody to love them and they don’t never need shoes, nor get all big eyed and hungry…” (Gilliam-Fisher 10), the word “rocks” can be replaced with “children,” the boy and his sister in my rendition. Other than household chores, their mother is not able to do much more than love them, at the same time her heart is breaking for what she will not give them—and that is a better life. She feels there is no way out of this prison because the treadmill won’t stop turning. The woman is the one drained emotionally who has to face her children’s eyes each day and at night her husband’s eyes. I chose to use “green” eyes to show there is always a spark of lightness and hope in a mother’s eyes and the half-clean clothes represent the lives half-lived.

His mother cannot help but look at her children with sad green eyes for her heart holds only sorrow and grief when she spies their clothes. So young and already their lives are spotted with darkness. She is not able to slow time and the cloth is still half clean. She will never get it back to its former naivety. It will not be clean, not as it once was. This town of misery will swallow both the children, like the dirty wash water drowns the fabric. The clothing comes out a bit less clean each time. Someday the tide of dreariness will take over and nothing will bring the lightness back to their clothes or lives. Only death can do that. Her son’s shirt will be replaced in a few years by a larger one, but not as white or innocent as the one he now wears.

I was particularly inspired by “Dear Diary,” since innocence lasts only so long and someday the children will grow up. They see more than their parents would like. All parents wish they could keep their children naïve about some adult matters as a way of sparing them hardship. Unfortunately, when a child grows up with hardships, they see more than the parent suspects and you only need to ask a child to know the truth. In the line “…little girls ain’t meant to understand,” (Gilliam-Fisher 61), it holds true for both children in my interpretation because both are unaccountable for the circumstances they were born into. The mother wants them to stay in that state, but she knows their purity will not last; it didn’t for her and it won’t for them. Their lives will become rougher and coarser and they cannot stay blameless forever, for they will grow up and recycle the process. Particularly for a girl in a mining town, she will grow up to spend her life taking care of everyone else. The boy will go off to the mines, where his day ends at night. The woman’s domestic drudgery will continue non-stop and the emotional toll will be greater for she is the caretaker.

As the boy grows, his shirt is made of coarser, rougher cotton in the hopes it will last longer, just as his mother prays he too will last longer, but never long enough—never long enough to keep him with her physically. For he can only live forever in her heart.

In “A Book Report, by Pearlie Webb,” one of my favorite poems, the line, “When you give me this book…it means Changes and these stories helps explains why things is the way they are…” (Gilliam-Fisher 25). The mother knows there are changes coming, but not the ones she would want and not soon enough. She knows the changes are greater for her daughter, but not for her son who someday can be released from his prison by death. Her daughter is acutely aware of what is coming for she sees more than she lets on.

The mother also feels her daughter will also outgrow her clothes and her life, but she knows they are trapped in Hell. She knows she can only make her children’s clothes for a time, but not a lifetime. In the future, her daughter’s tiny washed-out dress will become that of a wife and mother and her memory of her own life makes her sad, but mostly angry. Angry enough to tear the man’s shirt she is now mending, her grown son’s shirt, into frayed squares, triangles, and patches, just like the frayed edges of her life.

This next stanza in my prose was inspired by the poem, “Beautiful, the Owner Says.” Even though I portrayed their lives as shades of grey and black, to be human means to have hope. My idea was to show hope through lightness which I saw expressed in the line “But in the dark you see only what glows” (Gilliam-
Fisher 21). There is always hope, but not always light, not if you’re a woman in a coal mining town.

Tiny spots of dusty black lighten each night when her husband comes home alive, not well, but alive. She wishes her washing were not such a great indicator of his health. For each day the shirts are greying, just as his life is fading and his once dark hair lightens with time. A time that is rapidly closing in on all of them.

“Jake and Isom” inspired me to write about choices. In the line “Jake was seventeen when he figured he might be done with farming” (Gilliam-Fisher 18). He figures the only way for a man to make a living in a coal camp and better your chances of survival are to sign up with the union. He does not want to see that it puts you on the other side of your life – at odds with the family; he only sees it as a way out of Hell. His mother in my poem sees it as a death sentence for her son, but she is also aware that her son has choices, but not her daughter.

Thankfully there are no more children, no more sons. She could not bear it to scrub or mend any more workshirts. Her backaches would improve if only life were fair. Her son has signed up with the union. His father is proud, her daughter and herself sad. All she can do now is repair more shirts, mend more patches by using larger patches. And even more sewing together of what little is left of their lives.

“My Dearest Hazel” & “Another Book Report by Pearlie Webb,” warned the daughters of coal miners not to marry certain men “…she’d make us promise to not never marry a man who drinks…” (Gilliam-Fisher 9). I feel that a woman who marries a coal miner is not much better off despite how much she believes she loves him and can handle the pall that lies over the town. In order to better understand how women do not have options to marry or not because it would be economical suicide, I felt this quote helped to explain further, “Another Book Report by Pearlie Webb,” she states “There’s one advantage women have over men. A woman can go to hell and come back again” (Gilliam-Fisher 65). I don’t consider that much of an advantage when death is the only way out.

Her second child marries today, but her future husband is already married to his ever-changing shirts. She, in the hopefulness of a young woman believes he will be different, but her mother knows he never will. His shirts will only change in tone and hue, but never in cloth. Her mother knows her daughter is pregnant and would if by choice not choose the life of “mending” willingly. Her daughter knows her mother’s heart is as burdened as her own.

When I read, “A Reporter from Boston Comes to Lick Creek,” I felt that in a coal town, the mothers know their daughter’s lives will be the same lives they lived and was succinctly summed up in “We got three babies—two and four and five year old—and this cookpot and this tent and the clothes on our back” (Gilliam-Fisher 73). In my poem all a woman can hope for is a husband, children and hard times. The women pretty much settle to the fact that one day their husbands and sons might not return, much like the sailor’s wife who walks the widow’s peak looking for some sign of the ship that will bring her family back together again.

The day comes, the news expected. Her husband and son are both taken when the mine collapse. There will be no more dust to pound from their ragged clothes, for they have taken them along on their journey. The mending basket is still too full, the laundry yet on the line. She takes the bleak semi-soiled clean shirts and darns them, folds the laundry and puts everything in a basket. The next day she takes the basket to the neighbors. They had three sons and one husband. This time, one husband and two sons came home the same day her husband and son didn’t. The neighbor’s other son is yet too young. She thinks back to her own son at a younger age when he used to play with his little sister. This neighbor’s son will also outgrow his shirts. The day will arrive soon when his clothes become small and he too will start the cycle again. A new shirt. A new life to be destroyed. She dabs her eyes as she watches the boy go out to play, then turns stoically to leave. For now she must help her daughter and new son-in-law. She will be there when her last child starts her own family and watches the shirts change color over the years. She secretly hopes her now only child has nothing but daughters.
Works Cited

