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**Kettle Bottom**

Poetry by Diane Gilliam Fisher

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*Kettle bottom* refers to “petrified tree trunk / buried in the mountain, two, three hundred / pounds” that “*Drops through the mine roof*” and “*kills a man / just like that.*” It’s also Diane Gilliam Fisher’s harrowing metaphor for the constant threat of extinction faced by the coal mining families caught up in the events of the West Virginia mine wars of 1920-1921. Crucial to the intense emotional impact of this book is Fisher’s decision to let her people speak from the first person, to render their strength and sorrow and tenacious love into these etched-in-the-mind voices of individuals. A precocious girl child trying to articulate in her book reports the adult lessons imparted by her life as a miner’s daughter. (“May be, Miss Terry, my heart is not so good, for I have looked in the Bible as Mama told me, and I have looked in your *Changes* book to find answers, but I do not. It is the same old story, Miss Terry, and I still do not know why.”) A wife who can only identify her husband’s body by a small patch of blue-flowered fabric sewed under the arm of his shirt. (“When the man writing in the big black book / come around asking about identifying marks, / I said, *blue dress*. I told him, *Maude Stanley, 23.*”) And, excruciatingly imagined, a trapped miner experiencing his last days alone and in darkness. (“There is only setting here now, like Noah / waiting for the storm to pass. He must of pondered / long and hard on how to start over / in a whole new world.”)

These poems possess an overwhelming immediacy, though those whose lost days Fisher goes deep into the darkness to recover are all long “gone under the hill.” *Kettle Bottom* is a one-woman rescue operation accomplished in words that say plainly, as the miners might have, yet eloquently, as only a gifted poet can, that these men and women and children were once here in the same world as ours, that they gave up the breath in their lungs and even their very daylight to fuel this world, and that their hopes for their lives and the terrors they endured, who they loved and so often lost too soon—that all of it mattered. As it matters now that, after so many years, someone finally heard their faint tapping and, with the urgency of love, came tunneling toward them.

— Ann Stapleton