

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Diane Gilliam Fisher, who lives in Ohio, has published a book called *Kettle Bottom* that portrays the hard life of the West Virginia coal camps. Here is just one of her evocative poems.

Violet's Wash

You can't have nothing clean.
I scrubbed like a crazy woman
at Isom's clothes that first week
and here they come off the line, little black
stripes wherever I'd pinned them up
or hung them over—coal dust settles
on the clothesline, piles up
like a line of snow on a tree branch.
After that, I wiped down the clothesline
every time, but no matter, you can't
get it all off. His coveralls is stripy
with black and gray lines,
ankles of his pants is ringed around,
like marks left by shackles.
I thought I'd die that first week
when I seen him walk off to the mine,
black, burnt-looking marks
on his shirt over his shoulders, right
where wings would of folded.

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