

MELISSA

She lived in the path of the mine's shiny grit
with little sisters who cried white lanes
down their faces and a father whose hands
were crazed with ebony lines like county maps.

The mountainfolks called her Miss Melissa
and they said she had hearing of the heart.
It was she who said if a man's hunger was higher
than his stomach, and if you read to him
maybe you could keep him from starving for a day
or two. But if you taught him how to read,
he would never be hungry again. At least
not in some of those places covered with pride.

She was 18 when she started coaching them--
students, parents and not a few old coal diggers
who could barely write their names. Three nights
a week she coddled and coaxed and praised them.
She took the toughest cases on Sunday afternoons,
one on one, time after time of guiding
stumblers through "Jack has two black dogs."

Oh, she had other things to do. She could have
been a singer, but instead of practicing scales
in perfect pitch, she listened to their voices:
"See Nancy swing high. Nancy sings as she swings."

Miss Melissa stayed around too long and the dust
roughed up her throat, damped her lung power
and worse. But the way she saw it, a lyric soprano
who maybe could have sung Puccini like no other
was a good trade for a coal town poet, a minister
and a doctor who came back to care for his own.

And a husband who carries on the reading classes.

--Glenna Holloway