

CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE

She moved leanly through Indian twilight,  
shabby and unmet, slogging through swamps,  
trailing her long skirts through tarlike mud  
and the evil smell of skunk cabbage.

She stumbled and fell on shores that bullied her  
with dares and promises others never heard.  
She lay on the flats in bosomy youth, gazing  
blueward-- high hollow blue, pale-seamed  
with deep wet blue, teal and indigo  
priming the canvas, waiting for a subject:

Waiting for her to quiet her urgent hunger,  
waiting for her to find a wintersmith husband  
and breed a breed taller and stubbornner  
than blue emptiness. Without first-glance beauty,  
without dowry or lineage-- a razorish termagant  
on Tuesday, demure as dimitry on Wednesday,  
racy as red sequins on Saturday night  
then Sunday-caring through the rains  
gone white and heavy on her head. She was  
an enigma-- fine figure, unfathomable sum.

After her wedding for better and worse, feast  
and fire, splinter and gilding, she took  
her time with the art of ladyhood, more earned  
than learned, writing her own music while moving  
miles of railcars, tons of bloody meat.

She roughed-in composition with charcoal,  
handled pigments and brushes her way,  
toned the flattering, fuming, prodding blues  
waiting for their match, icing and steaming,  
waiting for her to model her rising brood  
with the back of her hand. She taught them  
to pose substance on air and water,  
add the warm shades to the palette,  
close harmony to the minor key chords. And at last  
to put in perspective a million highlights  
framing the watercolor palimpsest,  
the sound and light-stretched gamut of blues.

--Glenna Holloway,  
ARIEL