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Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet —
Alice George

Originally from Kentucky, Alice George earned her B.A. from Oberlin College then moved to the Chicago area. An earnest gardener, party-thrower and swimmer, Alice also co-edits *Rhino* magazine and is pursuing her MFA in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Alice performs her work regularly in the Chicago area and designs writing workshops for children and parents. In addition to poetry, she writes science fiction and makes her living helping nonprofits raise money. Alice's poems have been published in *The Manhattan Poetry Review*, *Farmer's Market*, *Rambunctious Review*, *West Branch*, and *Fish Stories: Collective 3*. Alice lives in Evanston, Illinois, with her kids, Sam and Sally, and husband Shawn Decker, a composer.

Writing the Resonant Day-to-Day—
A Discussion with Alice George

SRPR: One of the great strengths of your poems is their use of the everyday—this is their imagery, their subject matter, their language, their very fabric. “In the Big Pool,” for example, or “In The Back Room” while the metaphor and imaginative flights of the poems are leaping from image domain to image domain, the language of the poems stays concretely within the domain of household-mom-kids. In “Invasion,” the Persian Gulf War is parenthetical to life lived between mother and young son, though in a poetic sleight-of-hand, there is a shift so that domestic life becomes the parenthetical and the Gulf War shadow becomes central.

Alice: I write very few memory poems or introspective poems—I have an atrocious memory! So my poems are present tense as I try to capture the now before I forget it. As an adolescent, I would think during an event or experience, “I’m going to forget this.” And that was my original impulse toward writing—to get it down. I lie a lot because I have to invent what I don’t remember. Another reason I use present tense is to engage the reader in the here and now of the poem, but also as a way to think about my own life, to make it more interesting. I invoke a “you,” often, to help draw the reader in, or I ask a rhetorical question for the same reason. My big agenda in writing poems embedded in family life is that I’m determined to get at the richness of it—the good and the bad, the profound and banal, often in the same voice.

SRPR: I don’t see many “philosophical” poems either, that is, poems that speculate about how life could be or should be lived, or poems about ideas.

Alice: I had a good teacher once, Stuart Friebert, who said to me while I was an undergraduate at Antioch, “You need to think more in your work.” That has stayed with me probably because it was not natural for me. But I’m doing that now, on my own terms, in present tense, in the texture of the everyday.

SRPR: The source domain of your metaphors is often cooking or food, not extraordinary, gourmet, or exotic food, not cilantro or passion fruit, but rather onion, tomato, meatloaf. In “What If I Told You” the autumnal light is a “tomatoey glue.” That’s one metaphor I am certain I have never read. Totally de-romanticized. Is this deliberate?

Alice: Oh my God, you’re right—there’s food in everything I write. I just realized that! That must be my southern roots sprouting.

SRPR: Does it end there, de-romanticized, or is the ordinary exploited as a window into the extraordinary?

Alice: My poems have always been relatively autobiographical, but I get bored quickly, so one of the things I am always looking for is ways to transform the ordinary—like when a plain stone dipped in water seems changed into a jewel.

SRPR: Have your poems always had this subject matter?

Alice: No. I wrote “poor me” and nature poems that people write when they first start writing. Like other women poets of my generation, I grew up on Sexton and Plath, was told that, “yeah, they were great poets, but they were crazy.” I learned to employ the “deep image” like Merwin and Wright. But I was scared away from discursive, speculative poems—poems that deal with ideas.

SRPR: Why scared away?

Alice: Something seemed to be missing from those poems. A deep image poem does not have the space and time for the discursive or speculative. And somehow, I felt that something was always missing, something physical, present tense, present. After graduate school at Columbia, Missouri and then moving here, I have tried to open my poems to that. Recently, I took a workshop with Maureen Seaton that was wonderful for me. We experimented with a lot of repetitive forms. The forms made me remember things about form and repetition I’d learned from reading Elizabeth Bishop—about form being what makes a poem endure beyond its “song,” its message.

SRPR: In so many ways, she is right, but then, there are some famous dead ends, too, that is, poets who invented a form so idiosyncratic that nothing from it can be taken up by other poets—so while they are well-represented in anthologies, and studied in literature classes, the form they developed gifts no legacy, has no heirs. I’m thinking of Emily Dickinson and John Berryman. But no doubt about it, that form also is what made the poems endure beyond their song. Are there other aspects of form you are experimenting with?

Alice: Yes, I use sectioning poems as a strategy of opening up the poem beyond the demands of linear narrative or description. It’s a way of delaying closure or changing it in some sense.

SRPR: So much happens in the open space between sections—especially when you break a line and drop part of it not only into the next line or stanza, but the next section. It fights against expectation—elongates and heightens it. The surprise gives a great deal of satisfaction.

Alice: I am also experimenting with sound. Someone said once that poets can only use rhyme to say things they are certain of. I am not quite sure I believe that. I’m still working with structures of thought that such formal aspects of older poems can yield up. Sometimes those structures that command closure—and certainty—to happen, also delay it and test it.