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Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet:
Elaine Fowler Palencia

Elaine Fowler Palencia, Kentucky/Tennessee transplant into the midwest, published four pulp novels in the early 80s before turning to literary fiction. She is the author of two short story collections, *Small Caucasian Woman* and *Brier Country*, the latter due out in spring 2000 from the University of Missouri Press. In 1991 she began to write poetry and in 1997 published a chapbook, *Taking the Train*, with Grex Press. Published in numerous journals, her poetry has received an Illinois Arts Council Literary Award as well as a Pushcart Prize nomination and awards from *Willow Review* and the Kentucky State Poetry Society. She lives in Champaign, Illinois, with her husband, Michael, and Andrew, their 21 year old severely mentally and physically disabled son.

I Am Writing To You From A Far-Off Country:
A Discussion with Elaine Fowler Palencia

SRPR: Not many people write both poetry and fiction successfully. You've written fiction since the seventies, first pulp fiction under a *nom de plume*, and now your second volume of literary fiction is coming out with University of Missouri Press. What caused you to begin writing poetry?

Elaine: I didn't start writing poetry until 1991—in fact *SRPR* was the journal that first published my work. But in 1991, a woman I didn't know walked up to me in the grocery and said, "I could write yearbooks if I only had time. I have a gift like Beethoven, if I only had time." And she walked away. When I sat down the next morning to work on the short story I was writing, instead I wrote this mean little poem inspired by the woman's comments, only I changed it to the people who say such things at writers' conferences. After I finished it, I wrote another poem, this one serious, about or to or for Andrew, my son, an eternal, non-verbal two year old in a body that grows up despite sometimes catastrophic limitations and problems, who is frequently violent and sick, who lived and still lives with us. That summer, poetry invaded my writing, and Andrew was my muse. I began taking a new poem along to Andrew's doctor appointments. One day, I said idly, "I don't know why I can write about Andrew only in poetry." The doctor glanced up and said, "Oh, that's because you can only reach him through metaphor."

SRPR: Because you can't say what the experience is, what the object is? Only what it is *like*, that it is like other things whose names can figure some aspect of this thing that can't be named.

Elaine: Yes. It's like going to a country where nobody's been. No language study, no guidebook for this. Writing about Andrew was like coming into a new country and you've seen nothing like it before. And yet you have to tell what you've seen.

SRPR: You have to tell yourself too. And you have to witness for Andrew, who will never see because he will never know any other point of departure. When my daughter was paralyzed with GBS and in the intensive care unit for those horrible months, I felt as though the reality had switched places with dream: reality was what I was frenetically, in terror and hope, living in the ICU, and the other life I slipped into when I was not at the hospital was the dream.

Elaine: The poems also feel so embodied, as though flesh has become word, that I find, unlike my fiction, I don't want to fool with them. I don't show them to writing groups. They are, in the writing and revising, somehow mystical and private. Writing fiction is very different, like building a house with a dinner fork and a plastic spatula. If you just keep at it, you'll get the structure. But poetry for me is like hearing a train coming and just walking out onto the track and getting hit. That doesn't mean I don't revise and work a long time with structure—I do, and sometimes obsessively—but the impulse is entirely different. It will mount and mount, and then, the train's almost here. I plan my fiction. Poetry is a feeling that turns into language.

SRPR: These recent poems are different from those I have read in *Taking the Train*, your chapbook of poems that deal with Andrew. Those are raw, emotionally attenuated, the image-metaphors collapsing so quickly one into the next that the reader is thrown far out of the familiar into some world of excruciation. But the speaker of these newer poems has been in one of Dante's circles of hell long enough to draw Virgil a map and to know every sinner in town. Long enough to know that the physical leaving of hell is futile—when hell is over, there's a worse hell: the absence of hell which will take its unbearable landscape into any new, even heavenly, reality and overwhelm it. In these newer poems, the narratives that have spun from your situation for 21 years have meshed seamlessly with all other aspects of life. You connect the narrative to myths and religious consolations, but you subvert every one of them. God turns into a couple of bored satyrs who pitch Andrew forward, smashing his teeth. There is no intentionality, beneficent or evil. Prayer becomes a physical thing of the hands, the activities of caring for the body. There is nothing beyond to supplicate.

Elaine: Well, given my skeptical nature, I think that ideologies are not very useful in the face of suffering. All answers turn into questions and finally even questions are pointless; analysis is pointless. The only usefulness lies in action that relieves the suffering. Buddhism might be the only useful religion here.

SRPR: To paraphrase "Keeping Him At Home": "I know one thing: if you take the calf in your arms every day, you will be able to lift the bull." The poem connects, like the existentialists were fond of doing, to the entire mythic world of task and to human *virtu* in the face of meaningless task. And then it connects to the mysteries that task cannot articulate: "Meanwhile the dilemma will grow horns." Another metaphoric leap.

Elaine: I do go back to the Greeks, and I think I am lucky to have gone through college when existentialism was The Big Thing.

SRPR: *In extremis*, there is almost a comfort in such a clear avenue of choices. It is easier to fight than to mourn. And the enemy is known: death. Metaphor is the bridge back to the world you have left behind.

Elaine: Yes, and the learning of the world you are in. Even Aristotle said that metaphor most brings about learning.