**The Poet’s Assistant**

Elaine Fowler Palencia

I worked for him off and on for years.

He didn’t say much but had kind eyes,

except for the one time

I tried to straighten up

while he was out.

There was a gracious plenty of tools—

handsaws, planes, chisels, rulers, clamps,

some I couldn’t identify that he made himself,

all manner of raw materials,

and a big woven basket of spare parts

he’d root around in, humming to himself.

The room was cool, with tall windows

that somehow made their own weather.

Some days the place smelled spicy and exotic,

like a market in a faraway country,

other days of old clothes and defeat,

like a Goodwill store.

Mostly I swept up modifiers to compost in a hole out back,

sprayed for clichés and non sequiturs,

and dusted the books and the shelves where he stacked

the finished products in leatherbound boxes

made, he said, from his skin. His idea of humor.

The locked closet, who knows what was in it?

He kept the key on a chain around his neck and—

I know this because I went to the funeral—

was buried with it.

The family kept me on a couple of weeks

to help empty the house.

I was in no position to argue when

they took the boxes to the landfill because,

a cousin said, they made noises in the night.

The day he died the closet vanished.

Where it had been, a flat wall.

I drew a smiley face with wings on it

and pocketed the marker.

Then I dug up one of the gnarled plants

growing in the compost

and took it home, too. I don’t know why.

Now, something’s going on.

At night an eye opens on each leaf. Yesterday,

one of his boxes flew past the window, screaming,

and when I pick up the marker

it vibrates, as if demanding to be used.