Sitting at her table, she serves
the sopa de arroz to me
instinctively, and I watch her,
the absolute mamá, and eat words
I might have had to say more
out of embarrassment. To speak,
now-foreign words I used to speak,
too, dribble down her mouth as she serves
me albóndigas. No more
than a third are easy to me.
By the stove she does something with words
and looks at me only with her
back. I am full. I tell her
I taste the mint, and watch her speak
smiles at the stove. All my words
make her smile. Nani never serves
herself, she only watches me
with her skin, her hair. I ask for more.

I watch the mamá warming more
tortillas for me. I watch her
fingers in the flame for me.
Near her mouth, I see a wrinkle speak
of a man whose body serves
the ants like she serves me, then more words
from more wrinkles about children, words
about this and that, flowing more
easily from these other mouths. Each serves
as a tremendous string around her,
holding her together. They speak
Nani was this and that to me
and I wonder just how much of me
will die with her, what were the words
I could have been, was. Her insides speak
through a hundred wrinkles, now, more
than she can bear, steel around her,
shouting, then, What is this thing she serves?

She asks me if I want more.
I own no words to stop her.
Even before I speak, she serves.

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In the produce warehouses near Nogales, where Ríos lived as a child, he and his young friends would sometimes steal watermelons on hot summer days.

“One time we were liberating some watermelons and all of a sudden a semi-truck burst into flames and everyone came out to look at it,” Ríos recalls. “The guys from the warehouses came out and there were other kids stealing stuff and they all came out and we just watched this truck burn. As we watched, the truck got so hot it began to melt. Metal was falling to the ground and forming pools of metal.

“We got chased away. But I came back the next morning and this big carcass, this beast, this animal was still there, and this was its blood,” he says.

Ríos pried up one of the pools of metal and has kept his treasure ever since. He says it is part of his alphabet, that it invariably makes him remember something.

“It was a truck one moment and then this puddle the next. Isn’t that the basis of science fiction and everything else that is exploratory in its thought process and revelatory in what it shows us about the world—that it can change in a minute?” he asks.

Ríos says that his alphabet is made up not only of letters, which in and of themselves have meaning, but also of words and images. His realm as a writer is not only the alphabet he has used, but also the alphabet he has lived.

Alberto Alvaro Ríos was born and raised in the border town of Nogales, Arizona, the son of a Mexican father from Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, and an English mother from Warrington, Lancashire, England. His life, from the beginning, was rich and magical with the stories and languages and traditions of two cultures and the living perspective of three countries. He could literally stand on the border with one foot in Mexico and the other foot in the United States.

Today, Ríos is a Regents’ Professor of English at Arizona State University, where he has taught creative writing since 1982. Although his first language was Spanish, in school he and his friends were told they could no longer speak Spanish.

“We all raised our hands saying seguro que sí—of course we can speak it. But that’s not what they meant,” Ríos says. “We were simply not to speak it, at all. Some got swats even for speaking Spanish on the playground. Our teachers were trying to help, but we learned far more than that basic lesson. Our parents had taught us that you got swatted for doing something bad. So if we got swatted for speaking Spanish, then Spanish must be bad.”

For a time, the young Alberto misplaced his Spanish but created ways to communicate with relatives who only spoke their native language. With his grandmother, it was especially easy.

“I grew up calling her Nani, which is the diminutive of Nana, a word that travels between many languages. The way we talked to each other best, was, finally, very simple. It was in a language with an alphabet I think anyone will recognize: she would cook and I would eat. That’s how we talked. It tasted good.”

Where does a poet’s journey begin? For Ríos, there is no doubt. He was in second grade at Coronado Elementary School in Nogales.

“I got into trouble in second grade because I had committed the egregious crime of daydreaming. And now I recognize what was happening,” he explains. “I wasn’t just receiving information from my teachers and my books, I was trying to do something with it.”

Ríos did well in school. The world opened to him. But he recognized the strange cruelty of not being able to do things and explore the places he was learning about.

“It didn’t stop me,” he says. “That is to say, where could I go to do these things? Well, the imagination, of course, which is the province of childhood. I was pushed into it and it was magnified for me because I got in trouble for it. So I also recognized that it was a dangerous place, because you can’t be stopped there.”

It wasn’t until middle school that Ríos discovered another dangerous place: the back of his notebook where he began to write—phrases, words, lines. He did not show these words to anyone—not parents or teachers, not even friends.

“You knew they weren’t doing it, and if they knew you were, you’d be different,” he says.

He alone owned this dangerous place that he did not quite understand. A humanities teacher in high school was the first ever to see his work.

“I must have said I was writing or shown her something. She


The duality of his work and teaching has never hindered his ability to write, or to teach. He does, in fact, believe they feed one another.

“When I sit down to write something, I’m not neglecting my teaching one bit,” he says. “And when I speak aloud in front of a class, I’m not neglecting my writing one bit. They are two arms of the same body. They serve each other.”

In an undergraduate poetry class taught by Ríos, students read assignments they have written about themselves with unbridled imagery, revealing passions and secrets even they seem surprised to discover.

“Alberto spends a lot of time helping people open up,” says Carol Felix-Sol, a student who holds a masters’ degree in English literature and teaches at Asu’s American Language and Cultural program. “I think he’s really a master at making people feel comfortable. He’s very accepting. He opens people’s eyes to things they might never have seen.”

Rick Noguchi graduated with an MFA from the Creative Writing program in 1993. He came to ASU specifically to study with Ríos.

“One time he had me write about myself,” he says. “I didn’t know where to start. I thought, ‘I’ve never done anything except what I did, which was amazing to me.’”

He found what he had been doing all along had validity, that his lines and phrases were poems, that he was becoming, in fact, a poet.

Today, the ASU professor still writes from the same beginnings—a phrase, a word, a line—never a whole idea which, he says, would bring its own set of rules and negate the limitless possibilities that fuel his work.

“I don’t know where these phrases come from. It’s kind of like life-fishing. You have this big artistic ear; it’s like a big net that sort of trolls through the waters of living,” he says. “You hear things that other people hear, maybe you read them. But you hear or remember or see them differently, and if you have heard it, well, it’s yours.”

Take, for example, the phrase she walks on five legs—an image Ríos had of his mother, of all mothers who quietly wear superhuman qualities and ageless wisdom. From that image a poem grew.

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*The Woman in the Picture with Me: I am the Baby in this Picture, and the Woman is Young, Wearing a New Dress Whose Pattern Time Has Rendered Indistinct*

She walks on five legs, this woman, And lifts her baby with twelve arms. She has one eye, all over her body: With it she sees through strangers And around corners. Her skin covers the baby still: She knows quicker than the child The child is cold. This woman’s kiss, when it makes its slight noise On the baby’s cheek, sings With the voices she has heard In the lifetimes that are hers, The music she has imagined, The song she is hearing, The lives in her life in a chorus. The sound of her kiss is a white noise Full of centuries, spare in its sound Only from the weight of so much This, forging its diamond in a moment.

*—from Madre Sofía*