

D

iscovering the

## *Nani*

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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# e A V p H a B e t o f l i f e

IN THE ROOM OF HIS HOME where Alberto Ríos writes he keeps a precious object on a shelf. Amorphous, abstract, and shiny, some might mistake it for a bad piece of sculpture. But for Ríos it is a poem. He calls the object, for lack of a better title, a metal puddle. It is the distillation of an incident from his childhood, a delicious memory sealed forever in its transformation.



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

immediately showed me Lawrence Ferlinghetti," Ríos recalls. "That was the first time I saw a poem in its own form that was talking about things, that didn't sound vaguely Shakespearean, that didn't do anything except do what it 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.

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.

Ríos' writing process has served him well. His prolific body of work includes seven books of poetry, *Teodoro Luna's Two Kisses* (1992), *The Lime Orchard Woman* (1988), *Five Indiscretions* (1985), *The Warrington Poems* (1984), *Whispering to Fool the Wind* (1982), *Sleeping on Fists* (1981), and *Elk Heads on the Wall* (1979).

He also has published two books of short stories, *The Iguana Killer* (1984), and *Pig Cookies* (1995). On a recent sabbatical, Ríos completed a book of poetry, a novel, a book of essays, and most of another book of short stories.

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.

"Tito teaches what he does. Of course, he uses other poet's work, but when you read his work, you know he is sharing the same resources that inform his own writing," Noguchi says.

Noguchi's own first book of poetry, *The Ocean Inside Kenji Takezo*, received an award from the Associated Writing Programs' Award series. He credits Ríos with helping to shape his work.

"There are very few people I could relate to who had that duality of cultures. He has been my mentor, both as a teacher and a writer."

The people who define his life, images that transcend boundaries, populate Ríos' poems and short stories. They migrate between cultures and continents, between the magic and the real. Like Madre Sofía, the gypsy woman who prophesied: the future will make you tall.

She lifted her arm, but only with the tips  
of her fingers motioned me to sit opposite.  
She looked at me but spoke to my mother  
words dark, smoky like the small room,  
words coming like red ants stepping occasionally  
from a hole on a summer day in the valley,  
red ants from her mouth, her nose, her ears,  
tears from the corners of her cinched eyes.

—from *Madre Sofía*

His characters appear and re-invent themselves in new poems and forms, like Teodoro Luna losing his hand and his wife watching his transformation:

Teodoro Luna lost a hand.  
He could not recall  
The circumstance of its separation:  
One week it held bread to be buttered,  
Then another week in need of fingers  
There were none.

—from *The Work of Remembering Saint Louis*

She could see now in her man in his eyes the second white parts  
Of what he was becoming.  
First his hair, and his eyes, sometimes his flatfish tongue.  
She kept looking,  
How he had begun to wither, the wisps of his brows, the white  
Lines of saliva,  
The white arcs of his nails, his scars, his teeth and his legs,  
The foldings of his face.  
He was she saw making of himself in time the moth's cocoon,  
That he might break from it,  
A strong push and strong unfolding first of one new shoulder,  
Then of the other.

—from *Teodoro Luna's Old Joke*