

# At the Kitchen Table

## A Conversation With Alberto Ríos

By Leslie A. Wooten

The year 2002 was an important benchmark for Alberto Ríos, and not just because he had his 50th birthday last September. His book of poems, *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body*, was a National Book Award finalist, and he was presented with the Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award. These honors were added to an already impressive list that includes the Arizona Governor's Arts Award, the Walt Whitman Award, the Western States Book Award for Fiction, and six Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry. Ríos' work extends far beyond the covers of his 12 books and can be found in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* and over 175 other national and international literary anthologies. Besides being regularly taught and translated, his work has been adapted to dance as well as to classical and popular music. He has been awarded fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1994 he was named Regents' Professor of English at Arizona State University, a designation reserved for faculty who have demonstrated exceptional scholarship and outstanding achievements. An additional honor was bestowed upon Ríos at the university in the spring of 2003 when he was appointed the Katharine C. Turner Endowed Chair of English.

Ríos is a warm and congenial personality who graciously devotes time to others. In fact, making time to listen as well as converse with colleagues, students, friends, and family is a Ríos trademark. On different days during the spring and fall of 2002, Ríos welcomed me into his home in Chandler, Arizona, to chat about his life as writer and teacher. The house he shares with his wife and teenage son has formal dining and living rooms, but we gravitated to the airy, open kitchen and settled at a large table surrounded by typical family clutter: the daily newspaper, scattered napkins, empty glasses, a bowl of colorful fruit. The refrigerator door was crowded with family photographs and a spray of word magnets. There was the not-so-usual clutter as well: a see-through jar of gleaming marbles, a toy horse seesawing back and forth on a countertop, and vivid face masks dotting the walls. The pet spaniel, Kino, dozed nearby, oblivious to the murmur of our voices.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *Let's begin by talking about your role as an artist-citizen. Assuming you accept the title, what do you make of it?*

**Alberto Ríos:** The term speaks to the important idea of

public purpose, and that's a role I take seriously. I want my poems and stories to serve the community in the same manner the baker's bread does. People eat bakery bread for taste as well as nourishment, and my writing should provide a similar kind of sustenance. The baker's main ingredient is flour; mine is words. Yet both our products are created in large measure to serve others. The ultimate test for me is to offer a poem or story at the metaphoric kitchen table and have people respond as if I've passed them a slice of delicious buttered bread. In that sense, I never think of myself as reading these poems from a lectern, or of teaching them to a captive audience of students. My poems must take care of themselves and make their own way. I just wish they'd write home more.

**TBR:** *You're comfortable with audiences, large or small.*

**AR:** A sea of staring faces can be intimidating. Thinking of the lectern as a kitchen table helps me reduce the emotional space between myself and the audience, whether it's a group of 5 or 500. Often, I step away from the lectern or don't use one at all. The idea is to feel like I'm chatting to someone in a comfortable setting rather than making a formal presentation.

**TBR:** *Your audiences must feel comfortable because they always have plenty of questions.*

**AR:** That's what I want. I like the exchange. I like the dialogue and the curiosity. The poems will always be in the books, but *me* they have only for that moment. That's how I feel when I go hear other writers: I want to hear things about the book, about the poems, just as much as the poems themselves. When I go back to the book in my own home, I will hear the speaker's voice or remember something that was said about one of the poems and I will be richer for it. The ephemeral moment—a reading—is something, therefore, to enjoy for its intrinsic singularity. Writing lasts, but writers die.

**TBR:** *Do you feel this way about panel discussions as well? You are on so many of them.*

**AR:** I don't like being on panels nearly as much, because my tendency is to defer to what other participants say, even if I disagree. I'm especially bothered by hard-hitting debates and fighting dialogue—so prevalent on television these days. That kind of exchange promotes argument, and I don't particularly want to argue with anyone. It's finally a perverse entertainment. I'm there to listen and respond and grow, not defend and intimidate and shout. If you're coming there to argue, you will argue. My deference to others comes, I suspect, from how I was raised.

### A Partial List of Books by Alberto Ríos

#### POETRY

**The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body**, Copper Canyon, 2002

**Teodoro Luna's Two Kisses**, Norton, 1990

**The Lime Orchard Woman**, The Sheep Meadow Press, 1988

**Whispering to Fool the Wind**, The Sheep Meadow Press, 1982

#### FICTION

**The Curtain of Trees**, University of New Mexico, 1999

**Pig Cookies**, Chronicle Books, 1995

**The Iguana Killer**, University of New Mexico, 1998

#### NONFICTION

**Capirotada**, University of New Mexico, 1999

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That doesn't mean I don't have a point of view on things, or that I won't defend it in the right circumstances. A panel discussion, however, is so very rarely that right circumstance.

**TBR:** *What you've just said reminds me of your poem, "A Simple Thing to Know," in which a fellow from Mexico sits in an American jail all weekend without food. No one offers him a meal, and he's too polite to ask for one.*

**AR:** That actually happened not too long ago. I can relate to the situation even though I've never experienced anything so extreme myself. That particular poem is a story of manners—manners in the big sense of the word—and manners are no longer the first thing we assume of others. So, of course the authorities didn't understand him, since manners—good behavior, I mean here—are not part of a jail's daily routine and therefore not part of the jailer's expectations.

**TBR:** *That poem is in your book The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body, which was a finalist in the 2002 National Book Award. Did your kitchen-table philosophy serve you well during the hectic week of sold-out award ceremonies in New York?*

**AR:** Yes, but I have to say the whole experience was a little like stepping out of a VW bus into a racy Corvette. The celebrity attention lavished on the finalists was dazzling, certainly to me. Keeping the kitchen table in mind, however, made the evening table I *did* sit at seem friendly, and let me know I was in the right place. I was with friends. I definitely enjoyed the wild ride, though, every minute of it.

**TBR:** *You've had a different kind of ride as a teacher for over 20 years. How do you balance teaching with writing?*

**AR:** I've come to believe that teaching is a form of writing that involves spoken words rather than those fixed on a page. In teaching, I forfeit some personal writing time, but it's for the public purpose of sharing what I've learned and equipping students to write their own poems and stories. I certainly get a great deal back from what I give in teaching, which is a version of the kitchen-table dialogue that revolves around literary ideas and creativity. It's stimulating for me, and I hope for the students as well. Beyond that, and perhaps more importantly, I try to remember all the things I was and was not taught myself, and I try to imagine myself in that student's chair. There was so much I did not understand when I was a student, and I had no business being in that limbo—and teachers had no business leaving me there. As a teacher, that's the information I want to provide: the information, quite simply, that helps. This is like what I said earlier about giving a reading. As a teacher, I'm there for the moment. The information will be in the books, well beyond me. My job is to do something more than what books do.

**TBR:** *After eight books and chapbooks of poetry, three story collections, and a memoir, how do you keep the writing fresh?*

**AR:** Surprise is essential, and I think my capacity for it is enormous and naive. For one thing, every story I tell is new, even if I've told a version of it before. My memory is not very good, so I don't think I could exactly duplicate a story even if I wanted to. And, of course, perspective changes as time

passes, and stories shift to fit the altered view. Also, I am very much engaged with language and its wrestling match with feelings. Although I appreciate dictionaries and the wealth of words they contain, I realize there is much in the world that can't easily be defined by words alone. That untapped realm excites me because it means my work as a writer will never be done.

**TBR:** *Do you read the works of others when you are in the middle of a writing project?*

**AR:** I've been a voracious reader since childhood, but reading has never served as direct inspiration for my writing. The truth is, in all my reading I've never said, "Oh, that's exactly how I feel." If I did, I'd think there was nothing left for me to contribute. What reading does do, however, is let me know that such a thing as writing exists, and that makes me excited. I also feel an interesting disconnect as a reader. When I am reading a good book, I am in that book's hands, and it's all about the book—not about me as a writer, not about analysis, not about other books. When I read, I read. It is slow and delicious and wild. I am there for the horse ride.

**TBR:** *Is another book of poems on the horizon?*

**AR:** Actually, I think of *The Year of Confusion*, my novel-in-progress, as a long book of poetry. But yes, there is also a collection of poems in the works, based loosely on the love story of my great-grandparents, Clemente and Ventura. Everything I know about love will be mixed in with what I've heard and imagined their story to be. The subtext, of course, is that my great-grandparents' love story is *my* story—perhaps everybody's story—or, anyway, the story we would want for ourselves if we were writing our own lines.

**TBR:** *Of all the sensuous pleasures in life, which matters to you most?*

**AR:** I have a curious answer. Well-being. By that I mean having the ability to breathe and walk, to move through the day in good and regular ways, with the added bonus of getting to report on these things. If we can be voyeuristic and intrigued by all the salient and fleshy things we know about and do to each other, why not the simple workaday things as well? They don't count less, finally, though they get no press. I'm not saying I'm not interested in the other things, but there's something here worth thinking about. On any given day, sexy is good. But it's about, what, only 48 percent of the day, really. What about all the other stuff?

**TBR:** *Is well-being a pleasure you've come to appreciate in your 50th year?*

**AR:** Yes, but it's more. The moment that defined well-being for me occurred when I was a boy. It was a Saturday, and for some reason my parents had taken my brother and me for an outing to a luxury hotel on the outskirts of Nogales. There must have been a picnic or something, some kind of event, or we would never have gone there. At the time, the hotel was called Rancho Grande, but originally it was El Esplendor with a history of hosting movie stars on film location. That particular morning, we walked to the edge of a hill that had a panoramic

view of the Santa Cruz valley, a view that fit into the plans of many Westerns. This view would bring John Wayne to Nogales often. The day was warm. I stood with one foot up on a rock. My hands were on my hips. My new jeans fit perfectly. As I surveyed the valley, I felt as great as I ever had and perhaps ever would. It was a visceral moment of pure, simple pleasure—a feeling of well-being that remains a benchmark to this day, a moment I still treasure.

**TBR:** *Well-being doesn't have to be headline news, does it?*

**AR:** No. It's so often found in the ordinary dailiness of life. There's a poem in *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body* where I talk about drinking a glass of ice water. Anyone who's experienced a hot summer day in the Arizona desert knows the perfection of that cold drink. In my experience, there is no greater sense of well-being, and no pleasure more sensual, than ice-cold water when you really need it. And a lot of it.

**TBR:** *The poem with the ice water is "The Nipplebutton." It's clearly an intimate poem.*

**AR:** True. The poem is one of tenderness, where the heart opens up in a simple moment. The part of the poem about a drink of cold water, though, is exactly what it is: a singular visceral pleasure, one we've all experienced whether we've had words for it or not. In that way, our intimacy is sometimes also with the world. ■

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INTERVIEWER: **Leslie A. Wootten** is a writer who lives on a farm in Casa Grande, AZ.