



ALBERTO RIOS  
1952

Honored as a Historymaker 2005  
Award Winning Poet and Author



The following is an oral history interview with Alberto Rios (**AR**) conducted by Pam Stevenson (**PS**) for Historical League, Inc. and video-graphed by Ben Avechucu on September 22, 2004, in Chandler, Arizona.

*Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.  
Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Heritage Center Archives, an Historical Society Museum, Tempe, Arizona.*

**PS:** I'd like you to give your name and identify your full name and when you were born.

**AR:** I'm Alberto Rios and I was born in Nogales, Arizona, early 1950s, just a few days past my birthday as we sit here today. Long, long time ago, place far away.

**PS:** Can you give us the exact year?

**AR:** 1952.

**PS:** What date?

**AR:** September 18<sup>th</sup>.

**PS:** And Alberto Rios is your full name, I notice in your books you have a longer name.

**AR:** Alberto Alvaro Rios. There's a whole story that goes along with that as you can imagine.

**PS:** You want to tell that now or you want to tell that later?

**AR:** It's up to you.



**PS:** Why don't you go ahead and tell us.

**AR:** I was, I was named after my father, who when he was born, he was born in Tapachula in Chiapas on the border of Guatemala. And he was born as my grandmother told me during, uh, a volcano eruption — Paricutín — and as he was being born, uh, birds came flying into their house in the tropics which had no, no screens on the windows and they, they sat in the rafters and made this, this horrible loud noise as my moth—as my father was being born. And my grandmother said, she had no voice, it was the birds. And, and, so he was gifted into the world in this very special way that, that was, uh, otherwise contextualized by the Mexican Revolution.

And my grandfather whose name was Margarito fought on the side of Alvaro Obregón, who actually came from Sonora in the Northern part of Mexico but they were, they were down in that region and Alvaro Obregón, who later became president of Mexico was going to be my father's godfather, was going to christen him. And so my father's family named my father after Alvaro Obregón. But about two months before my father was born, Obregón was assassinated. Now that gave my family a little bit of a problematic situation. But it also helped us understand what a revolutionary family went through.

My father was born in Tapachula on the border of Guatemala; I was born in Nogales on the border with Mexico northern border. We had family in Nogales in the North and Tapachula in the South so close to the border so that in case my grandfather's side of the revolution were to lose, the family could easily cross the border. So this, this, these were the circumstances of a revolutionary family in, in Mexico in that time.

And my father, when he came to this country found that, uh, people had a difficult time pronouncing Alvaro and his name was Alvaro Alberto, so when he, uh, joined the service he switched his name around to Alberto Alvaro and that's how I get it. And my connection is both to him and to that moment of his birth, those birds and also the Mexican revolution and all of the things that were surrounding, uh, not only Mexico at that time but the world.

**PS:** Rios is?

**AR:** Rios is my, my father's name, family name and, uh, of course it means rivers. My mother's maiden name, my mother was born in Boyington, Lancaster, England. I look a lot more like my mother, she has a mustache it's very strange but —. Her maiden name, her unmarried name was Fogg, so there was a lot of moisture in, in the family.

**PS:** And you end up in the desert.

**AR:** And I ended up in the desert where moisture was invisible but always there somewhere to be found. That was my job as a writer and as a human to make sure I found it.

**PS:** Why don't you tell me a little bit more about how your parents met and ended up in Arizona?



**AR:** Well I, I said my father changed his name around; it was a little bit more than that. And it did lead there, their ultimate meeting. My father's father, my grandfather Margarito, who was in the Mexican revolution, was a very stern man. Uh, and you see pictures of him — I've got a photograph of him in one of my book jackets — what I love about him being so stern is that his name in Mexican culture it's very common for this to happen, that his name Margarito for this tough guy translates as daisy. Which is — I like that. Well, my father and my grandfather didn't get along terrifically well and when my father was about 14 and the family was living in San Luis Potosí in Mexico, my father ran away from home. Which in Mexican culture, uh, it's, it's not like running away from home, uh, in the movies. Here it just means you go and find your great aunts and go somewhere else in the family. Families are so large and, and, uh, there's always somewhere to go, so running away from home is, is not — it's more familial and friendly rather than, than histrionics and, and separation.

Well, he, he came up to Nogales at that time at about 14 and he went to Nogales High School but he hadn't gone the route of citizenship and all of those things so there were some questions and he, he joined the service much too young — joined the Army because he had heard that if you were to complete a tour of duty, uh, and toward the end of World War II, if you were to complete a tour of duty, uh, you would get citizenship. Which was accurate in its own way, but not as easy as it sounded. Well, he joined the, what was then the Army and, uh, Alvaro Alberto, but was way too young and, and this information caught up with him after boot camp and, uh, so he was politely asked to leave the Army and deportation is too big a word, uh, he, he, uh, says that it was a, a, a little bit friendlier but, but stern. Uh, he had to leave the Army and go back to Mexico. We can use stronger words for that, but, but that's what was done.

Now when you say a word like deportation, it sounds so big and huge and scary, but he said really all it came down to was there were a couple of guys, they put him in the back of a pickup truck, they drove him to the border and they said, 'get out and don't come back.' So they waited for the truck to, uh, to leave, he came back across the border, joined the service again, uh, switched his name around at that point to Al— Alberto Alvaro, rather than Alvaro Alberto. Sure enough this fooled everybody.

At this point World War II had ended and, and the Korean Conflict was happening. And he was caught in what was called the Truman Year, in which he had enlisted for a set amount of time but President Truman decreed that everybody in the service would simply serve one extra year. Well, all right. He at that point now had moved a lot — the service had shifted from simply Army — he had been in the Army Air Corps and that cleaved off and became the Air Force. So he was now in the Air Force though he had joined the Army he became a Staff Sergeant — he actually learned English in the Service, got his GED in the service, was decorated as a participant in the Berlin Airlift. He traveled quite a bit; he was in I guess Germany and, and North Africa, Paris and ultimately England. And he was a Para trooping medic, which I can't imagine. It's so difficult to think of my father jumping out of airplanes. This wild man, who later became a justice of the peace, very different, very different existence. But he was medic. He was stationed in my mother's hometown toward the end of his tour of duty.



My mother was training to be a nurse; she became a nurse and, uh, she was in school at the Warrington Infirmary and, and, uh, the circumstances of being in the medical profession then meant that service men and, and nurses and everybody worked together. It also meant that there were parties and, and who knew what else and it was cold — I don't even want to know the circumstances but my mother and father, uh, began dating. This was about two years before my father finished. And they, they, they dated for, for two years, got engaged and then my father decided he would, uh, stay in England and that they would get married and, and they would make their life there.

And everything was, was just fine. They did everything they, they needed to do both for the service and for, uh, the rules of, of citizenship in England. They, they, uh, rented a house so that they had evidence of domicile. They, uh, ran the bans in the church. My mother curiously enough was Catholic in England and at the time that was something a rarity. But they, they ran the bans of their announcement their engagement in the church and they, uh, bought a wedding cake and a wedding dress. Had everything ready to go. And about two days before my father was to be discharged, the wedding was planned and everything was going to happen — my father got some news and he had experienced — uh, my father was very dark, very dark skin, black hair — my mother was very light. This was a, uh, a source of some difficulty for some people. My mother's family loved my father. And my father in Europe had had a, an extraordinarily wonderful time; very positively received and never experienced any kind of prejudice or, or feelings regarding his — you know what he looked like. And in fact there was even lore that it was luck. For example on New Year's Eve to have, uh, a black-haired man cross your, your doorway was good luck. The luck of a dark-haired man as my mother always said.

Well, two days before my father was to be discharged, his commanding officer, who in fact, did have a problem with this, with this marriage and with, with — not necessarily my father but with this happening — sent him back to the United States to be discharged. My father only had time to go to my mother's house that evening, give her the money that he had, which wasn't much, tell her that he loved her and that he would, that he hoped and he told her when, when he was going to be discharged and where and then said, "I hope I see you there." And then he left.

And my mother, who'd never traveled, I mean the English in general, here's a wild generalization that — the English just don't travel. My mother had only in her whole life up to that point, she was about 20, 21 — had only been as far as Blackpool and that's two train stops away from where she lived all her life. She lived in Warrington between Liverpool and Manchester. And Blackpool was kind of, you know, uh, the, the resort town. And that's as far as she'd ever been in her life. But when my father left and when he told her this news, she packed up her bags, bought an ocean liner ticket, said goodbye to her family. And she said, she'll never forget she was on that boat, all her family was standing there and all her friends. And this was a different time and a different place. There weren't cell phones; she couldn't check with my father, she couldn't say, "Are you sure? Are you really going to be there?" It was an act of faith, an act of love. She knew looking at her family that this very likely would be the last time she would see them. Traveling the ocean, uh, who came back from that?





And she turned around she said and she, she crossed the ocean, she, you know, disembarked in New York, took a bus from New York to Salt Lake City, which is where my father was discharged within that, that, that sequence of days of, of that month. Traveled the whole length of the country, all of this all by herself and — my little mother, I, you know, she's, she's not five feet tall, she's a little Englishwoman — uh, young girl then crossed the country. Her luggage weighed more than she did I'm sure and when she got off the bus in Salt Lake City my father was standing there waiting for her. And as you can imagine, this is a story I grew up with, and it was a wonderful story. Something I've never forgotten. Uh, do what you say you're going to do and you do it for good reason. And it was a good lesson to me.

When, when my father picked my mother up, they, he then took her down to, uh, first to Tucson. They, they came down by bus to Tucson and then, and then in Tucson they got — I guess they came by train to Tucson then they got on the bus between Tucson and Nogales. And in, in the, the — this would have been, I don't know, late forties, early — I guess late, beginning of the fifties. Uh, the bus was used largely, uh, or, or equally as much by then called Papago Indian, the Tohono Odon, to travel along the reservation or to get home. And when they got on the bus in Tucson, my mother looked at everybody else on the bus, who didn't look at all like she did, nor did they look like my father; they looked like something else. And my mother, who is very open minded I have to say to this day, she said to my father, "who are these people?" And my father said, "Well, they're Indians." And my mother coming from England and at this time period had only the movies to go on and she said, "Indians? Oh, okay." And then my father did something, you know, that she's never forgiven him for — about half way between Tucson and Nogales there was a dust devil in the distance and my mother wide-eyed asked, "What's that?" because there were no dust devils in England. My father said, "Oh, don't say anything. It's the cowboys coming to get the Indians." And my mother bought it hook, line and sinker and just sort of sat there and just hoped for the best. And of course, my father started laughing her and she never forgot that was her introduction to this part of the country.

When she got to Nogales, uh, my father's family, uh, of course, fell in love with her right away. And, uh, after they got married, they went to our version of Blackpool which is Guaymas and that's where they went for their honeymoon. And my mother thinking it to be like Blackpool, did just what she did in Blackpool. On their honeymoon she went right out onto the beach in her, in her bathing suit and — you know to do whatever she did, uh, lie down on the sand or whatever. But in Blackpool they only have like a photograph of the sun taped to the sky. They don't have a real sun. And Guaymas was a very, very different experience. When she went out, it wasn't but 10 or 15 minutes that she, who had never seen — had real sun on her skin, literally got sun poisoning and had to be rushed to the hospital. And she said, "Well, I spent my honeymoon like this, but it's not what you think."

So she had that very traumatic little, uh, experience with the sun and, and a further introduction to the region but also it was unforgettable.

**PS:** Turn around and go back to England.

**AR:** Well she, she, she didn't know what she'd gotten into. And, uh, but, but as she said, and I've asked



her many times, ‘didn’t you, didn’t you want to go back?’ Or, because she didn’t go home for something like 26 years. We just didn’t have the money and, and circumstances just made it difficult. And she said, “well, no,” she said when she got here, she knew that the only way she was going to be happy is to do it like everybody else does it, whatever, whatever the circumstances, uh, suggested, she, she was there to do it and, and be part of it. And, she’s always lived up to that so. You know, she learned to speak Spanish with an English accent so everybody knew who she was. She was the English nurse.

**PS:** But did she continue to \_\_\_ nursing?

**AR:** Yes, she did and she, she — the whole time I was growing up she was a nurse. Uh, one, one more part of that story and, and this became a very, very important, important part of my, uh, not only my life, my, my imaginative life as well, is the very first year they were married, they, they were married in September and the first Thanksgiving which my mother didn’t know anything about, uh, in fact everybody invited was saying, ‘well, you’re going to be coming to Thanksgiving lunch right?’ Everybody went to my great grandmother’s house for these kinds of occasions where — the whole time in my childhood, my — this was the gathering spot and everybody went there and everybody kept saying, ‘now, you’re, you’re going to be coming.’ And my mother was quite unsure about this because it was on a Thursday and she knew my father worked. So she kept kind of hemming and hawing and kind of going, “well, we’ll, we’ll try.” And this was a mystery to everybody. And, uh, you know, uh, then my father’s family came from Mexico — very often immigrant families will adopt customs, uh, full bore — and of course Thanksgiving was, was being American and it was a very important sort of thing. So they, she, they didn’t understand why she was hesitant. Then of course my father explained it to her and, and, uh, they, they, uh, of course went. But in the process my mother wanted to do something for my father as an act of Thanksgiving. And she made him something that she knew he loved pecan pie. And as she made it, this young bride making this sort of first kind of special meal, when she made it she put a cup of salt in the pie instead of a cup of sugar. So she made the pie, it all baked out just fine; looked good — you know pecan pies just look wonderful. My father takes a big slice, puts it on his plate and they’re all ready and, just you know everything’s wonderful. And then he takes a bite of the pie. And, and of course, his face falls to the ground, it’s just awful tasting. And my mother, I hear, just burst into tears. My father said, “No, no.” And he took her back into the kitchen and together they made another pecan pie and every Thanksgiving for the rest of their marriage while my father was still alive, they made pecan pies for everybody. It was a pretty good story. And a pretty good lesson to me.

And you know, they were making something like 40, 50, 60 pies in their heyday. And, uh, and they all, and my, my mother always said, “It’s the rum.” They were very popular and, and — nobody knew the original story about why, they just liked pies and, you know, the story got a little lost. Uh, but I was always careful to, to remember it myself. And, and, uh, something very funny happened to me many years later and it wasn’t actually all that long ago. Uh, I was asking my mother about pecan pies and, uh, I said, ‘well now these pecan pies that you always make, you, did you, did your mother make them, did you bring the recipe with you? Uh, cause I didn’t think that English made pecan pies.’ And she says, “Well, they don’t. No, I didn’t bring the recipe with me,” she said. “I got it off the back of a bottle of Karo Syrup.” All these



years, all the mythology that goes around something like that. She said, “No I got it off the back of a bottle of Karo Syrup, I just knew your father liked it and that was that.” And so this big thing kind of, uh, deflated but, but I love that she wasn’t scared to try new things.

**PS:** And I love that — people did get recipes like that. My mother got her pumpkin pie recipe from the can of Libby’s.

**AR:** There you go, there you go.

**PS:** (Inaudible)

**AR:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**PS:** Uh, tell me a little bit more about your father. You mention that he was a justice of the peace, what was his profession?

**AR:** Well, my father when he first came back from the service worked, uh, every odd job there was. Uh, he was a doorman at, uh, bellman at the old, uh, Montezuma Hotel which has long since passed. And worked at Don Dan’s Chevron gas station; and then finally landed a job that he — and, and he did some work also I think it was, I don’t know if it was surveying work, but I think it was, for the U.S.-Mexico Border Commission, which was a very big deal early on in the ‘50s. And so he played some little part in that was, uh, something that has become very important to me later on in life. Border issues, uh, which I, I, I was glad he played a part in that.

But he finally landed a job that he didn’t think he’d get and again, uh, circumstances were different and, uh, there was prejudice, you know, abundant in, in both loud and quiet ways and, and he got a job that he felt lucky to get and turned out to be a terrific job, but, but he didn’t know if he’d be successful at it. But it was Coca Cola — distributing all of the Coca Cola for, for, uh, uh, all of Santa Cruz County. And, uh, it was wonderful because I got to have all the soda I wanted and all the old — the Nehi sodas, Nehi Grape and Sunrise Orange and all those old sodas, uh, he got to drive the big Coca Cola truck which I thought was about as, you know, cool as anything could be as a kid. And I got to, to drive with him a lot of times on his routes which went way over into, you know, Patagonia and over on, on the other side to Amado and, and all the way over to the, uh, to the borders of the county which were, were great. And much more treacherous than they are today. We, we had the freeways but the old, uh, Old Tucson Highway and, and the highways that were kind of in use before that were, were pretty precarious for a big creaky truck, uh, sort of making its way. But of course for me it was all adventure — I loved it. It was, it was wonderful.

**PS:** They were probably glass bottles then.

**AR:** They were definitely, definitely glass bottles every one of them and, and — but tough surprisingly — they could take a lot of, lot of punishment. Uh, and, and then we had our rituals, I, I was his co-pilot as so



many fathers and sons play out that ritual. And, uh, he, he had been, as I said a Para trooping medic and had been in airplanes, and had been in airplanes quite a bit and, and I think in retrospect that it was a little bit bitter sweet, this pilot and co-pilot little ritual that we had because it had been a life or death situation for him not that far back and to, to, to, uh, subvert that by making something healthy and fun out of that I think a very useful thing. And I had a lot of fun of course just participating in that with him so. We'd stop in, at the gas station in Amado and I'd get a Bullet, remember the Bullet, which is another interesting phrase, word — a Bullet ice cream was a big Popsicle out of the thing and we'd have a little sort of go at it. My, my favorite thing is that every Sunday he took the, uh, he delivered all the Coke to the horse races in Sonoita and, uh, so I got to see all of these horse races — though I didn't really get to see them because I always collecting bottles. He'd give me like a penny or something for every Coke bottle I could find. So I saw, I saw a lot of the horse races through the slats in the stands. So I have this blinder like vision of how, how all these things work. But, but every fourth Sunday, as I recall, they had a, a local rodeo rather than a horse race, so, so I grew up very much in that horse country mode as well. That rural Arizona kind of life that was a lot of fun and, and very different from Nogales proper. Little town, uh, but there, but it was still town and rural life which was such a big part of Santa Cruz County, uh, also played a big part in my, in my upbringing. I got to see, see it all.

**PS:** Did he get his citizenship after he got home?

**AR:** Yes, after he got out of the service, uh, he, he was at — you know, apparently they did catch up with him again, but after he'd gotten these, uh, the decoration, he was a Staff Sergeant by this time, he'd learned English, he'd gotten his GED, he'd done, uh, everything he needed to do, uh, he, he got an Honorable Discharge and everything was good. And he did get citizenship, uh, after that.

And, as did my mother. My mother's citizenship, uh, was a curious affair for her. And my father was, was certain this is what he wanted to do, and, and you know, after all Mexico is still right next to the United States. He wasn't leaving, leaving home geographically in the same way that my mother had. And there was still family and it was very, you know, uh, relatively, uh, well it was at least for him, I think, easier to do. And my mother when, when my mother got her citizenship, uh, there was a wonderful ritual that the town, uh, participating in, in terms of citizenships. Citizenship, uh, in the, in the '50s was usually— they did it several times a year, probably twice a year — in the judges chamber in the Superior Court up in the big old court house and, you know, a lot of symbolism, lot of, lot of excitement about it. And it was usually maybe, I don't know, five, ten, fifteen people, uh, much different from what it's like today. And these were very special occasions and you would take citizenship classes and, you know, a whole thing that went with it. And my, my mother when I, when I finally asked her about what that was like she said, "Well, you know, it's always been a little hard to talk about." She would never go back, she said she's never been sorry but a little think happened that, that, that just put a wrench into everything for her on the day that she became a citizen. And it was well-intentioned and she understood that it was but it affected her so profoundly that, that she always found it difficult to, to discuss, but later — let me just jump ahead for a second — later when I was in junior high school and high school, I was in chorus and our big project every year was to march down from the high school, single file over to the courthouse, the 1912





courthouse, and we would sing patriotic songs for the citizenship, uh, ceremonies, you know, “I want,” you know, “I want to live in America,” no, I don’t know what we sang, uh, patriot, you know, “America the Beautiful”, you know all of those songs. Uh, more than you think, there’s a lot of them and we’d learn them and we’d go sing. And this had happened for my mother. High school she said, uh, had come and it was the band that came to play when she was becoming a citizen. And everybody in town knew my mother and she stood out, I mean she was so white and blond hair, and blue and so she just stood out. And, and so they, the band director knew her and wanted to do something special for her. So they had a little surprise and I as I say she understood this was totally well-intentioned but when, when they came and they, my mother was becoming a citizenship, citizen with, with other people — mostly Mexican, probably all — the band started to play “God Save The Queen” as an homage to her, just a little special thing. But of course that’s like playing the national anthem and it just, she said, it just hit her heart because here she was renouncing citizenship you know in England and yet they were playing “God Save The Queen,” which she had learned as “God Save The King,” and, and, uh, was, had felt her life so many times with that, those same feelings that now she was trying to exchange that it was a very difficult thing and she cried she said. And everybody thought it was because she was a citizen and it was, it was because she was becoming a citizen but, the hurdle was very grounded for her and she really did understand in, in a very tough way, what that meant.

**PS:** So you were born in Nogales.

**AR:** Yes, I was, I was born in the old St. Joseph’s Hospital, which was right on the border. And I was telling the story earlier about my father being born when, when Paricutín the, the volcano was, was, uh, uh, exploding really. Well, when I was born, I was born September 18<sup>th</sup>, but Mexico has two independence days. Uh, 5<sup>th</sup> of May — Cinco de Mayo, which is actually the, the lesser of the two, uh, independence days. The other was independence, from, independence from Spain, which is the *dies y seis de septiembre* — or the 16<sup>th</sup> of September. And I was actually supposed to be born on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, so my mother was in the hospital on that day. And on the evening of the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, uh, Nogales, for all of the years I can remember have these wonderful street parties — *perradas* — and there, people are, are wild in the streets. They’ve got all of these bands, it’s like a battle of the bands and everybody’s kind of celebrating and, and yelling and there’s all this sort, all this sort of stuff. And the old St. Joseph’s Hospital was right on the border. And so my mother says what she can remember from me being born — because in those days, we think of hospitals today as sort of enclosed, you know, air-conditioned, uh, sorts of affairs — well the old hospital was nothing like that. It was a screen door affair and, uh, no air conditioning and, and you heard everything. She said all she heard as she was having these labor pains, much like my grandmother had gone through, was all of the street parties — everybody just having this great time, all of this noise — and, and that became a, a kind of an interesting, for me, you know, as I was being brought into the world, it was also that kind of, how, how do we even want phrase that. That kind of loud trumpeting into the world with which we, we hope we, you know, we, we arrive, we, we want some sort of fanfare I suppose but when you actually get it, it’s a, it’s a, it’s a, a sort of a shocker. And my poor mother and my poor grandmother I can’t imagine they get sub\_\_ into that. And, and, uh, she said though that finally it, it helped. It helped. It made her think this was a good thing.



**PS:** And you were the first child?

**AR:** I was the first child. I have one brother. And you know, it's funny my, my, uh, I look like my mother as I was saying and, you know, lighter skin, bluish eyes and so on. And, but I was named after my father. My brother who looks a lot more like my father was named after my mother's side of the family. So his name is very English sounding: Thomas Joseph. Though he looks a lot more like my father, so we had this, this kind of funny difference then.

He, he's younger than I —

**PS:** \_\_ you were born.

**AR:** That's right, that's right, that's right. My, uh, while, while I've taken a kind of route in, in the — as a writer and in universities and, and so on, my, my brother has always loved the outdoors and he's worked for the Forest Service I think since before he was born. And he's traveled the world actually helping other countries set up their forest services and has had quite a good and wonderful career. Though he's younger than I am, I think he can retire now because he's been on hazard duty for so many years. And I remember through the years he'd come home and — even while I was in high school he'd come home with, you know, after being away for, for a week at a time. He was on hotshot crews and he'd come back, you know, just black with, with, with, wood smoke and so on. His eyebrows would be burned off and, and he couldn't even take a shower; he'd just fall straight into bed exhausted and he'd sleep for days. It's a life he loved.

**PS:** A lot of Mexican families tend to be larger.

**AR:** Much larger, uh, my, this was, uh, my mother couldn't have, uh, more children. There was some problems and, and, uh, so it was just, uh, the two of us. And, uh, and you're right, uh, it was something of a, an oddity. Uh, but oddity suited us all well. So it was okay.

**PS:** (inaudible)

**AR:** A little bit, a little bit.

**PS:** Uh, you've written so much about growing up in Nogales.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Uh, are there some particular memories of that growing up that you want to talk about?

**AR:** Well, you know, I want to talk about them all. It is, it is in essence what I write about. And but I don't write about these things in some sort of decorative or, or, or frivolous fashion. I mean, I think that



particular growing up made me this particular person and, uh, it's worth talking about because this particular person ends up being, uh, complex in some very interesting ways, I think, of course, that have helped teach, help me talk, helped me, uh, live. And certainly as a writer these are things I try to capture. But I'm not trying to capture them for me. I already did 'em.. I lived through them. And, uh, what it is, is in writing about a, a lot of these I, I think of them as adventures — I think it speaks to what other people have gone through. And it helps articulate the human experience which I think has value doing that helps us see what we have in common. And I grew up in a place where, uh, not seeing what we have in common. Living on the border has become a more pronounced and growing issue. So if I can start to talk about what in fact we do have in common, I think there is something I'm adding to the world that's ultimately good.

When I grew up, the border was a place where, where people were connected; where we met up, where you, you celebrated that connection. And now in recent years it's where we're divided; where we're disconnected from each other. And where we're putting up big walls. Uh, I didn't grow up that way. And that's not the border I know and that's not the border that I want to know, uh, in many ways. So, I, I, I speak a lot about it. Uh, I've had a lot of good opportunities to say this in large, large venues. And, uh, you know, when President Fox recently visited, uh, Governor Napolitano asked me to write a poem, uh, about this and I, this was for me a particularly, uh, nice alignment of all of the stars to be able to talk about the border, to be able to have the Governor of Arizona, the President of Mexico, uh, all of us there in one place and, and in front of several thousand people, to be able to, to not only have written the poem, but then to, to, to be able to speak this poem out. And then to have the Governor and say a few words. But, but also a small brief conversation I had with President Fox about his, uh, was very meaningful and helped me understand that this was an important thing to do. And, uh, a little later in this I'll, I'll read that, that particular piece cause I think it is important.

But the border I grew up with was in essence wide open but it didn't scare anybody, nor was everybody clamoring to necessarily come running across, one way or the other. All the celebrations, the things that we celebrated were very often Mexican holidays: 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 16<sup>th</sup> of September. We'd have a 5<sup>th</sup> of May queen and all those sorts of things. The parades, which I remember, uh, so well, the parades would start in the Mexico part of Nogales — there were two Nogaleses, there's Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora, called "Ambos Nogales," or both Nogaleses. Uh, we, there was a fence but it was like a fence you'd put between two yards and it was a very minimal affair. And anybody who wanted to cross the fence, you didn't need to do anything but hop it. So that wasn't the issue it, the, the, the fence then meant something very different. And it wasn't about laws. Laws very rarely work. It, it, it, it's what people will do and, and what is the affect of manners and how do we behave and, and the ethics that we bring to that moment, that are going to make all the difference in the world. Not, not some, something else that's extrinsic to us but something intrinsic to what we bring to that moment.

Well, the, the, uh, the parade, the, the, on, on any celebration day they'd open the border wide open. Everybody would go back and forth. It was a big fair day and the parade would start on one side of the border and it would come, you know, across and it — I could hear the Mexican drum and bugle corps and the high school band and, and, uh, it was a very integrated, very participate— participative and celebratory



event that even as a child I understood was right. That's how it ought to be and, and that it added up to something; it meant something. And, and everybody was happy; it was a good day. Uh, and, you know at the end of the day, all right, everybody go home and, hey, everybody'd go home. And you'd close the border and back to business. But it wasn't a big deal. Uh, it was like somebody opening the gate because he needed to park the car. All right, you open the gate. It was not a, not a big deal and we understood that.

Through the, through the years that's changed. And, uh, for me the marker was very distinct. And I know just when I, I believe it happened. And it was when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. A very curious little moment that I think for most of the world plays out, you know, we, everybody knows where they were when, when, when JFK was, was assassinated. But it was very different if you were in a border town. And a few under— know this. I think we probably do now after the recent terrorist events and so on. But this was I think lesser known, particularly in the '60s. But when, on that day I, I was, uh, in fifth or sixth grade; I was at Coronado Elementary School and it was lunchtime. And what I'll never forget, just curiously because for me it works as a great metaphor that you almost can't persuade people happened so you just have to live with it. But I was outside in a part of the school I wasn't normally at on a little lawn area and a friend of mine — we, we had found a millipede and it was just walking. We thought that was the strangest thing we'd ever seen; we'd seen centipedes and scorpions and this is the desert after all. But a millipede with all of those tentacles and that movement. All of those — now as a metaphor I think, all of the strands of what that would mean.

This is what we were watching when somebody came running around and said, "Come over here, quick, the teacher's crying." They didn't say that the President had been shot; they said — and this is how kids would of course receive this moment — 'The teacher's crying' because that's what mattered to us. We, we, it was very difficult to, to perceive what far away events, how that mattered to us. It's what the teacher was doing. So we went and she told us that the President had been shot. And there was a little TV, uh, which was a very special thing and everybody from all of the classes had crowded around it. And it was a Friday and it was a Friday in a particular cycle where we just normally would get that afternoon off, just by coincidence. And the town had this little, uh, you know they had programs for students to keep you from getting in trouble that sort of thing and a bowling alley had opened of all things in town — this little town, a bowling alley had opened and they had started a little bowling league for, for kids like I guess that's how you're going to keep out of trouble. Yeah, I'm, I'm busy bowling today. But I, you know, had swept into that wave, I was, I, I was in that bowling league and, and, and so on.

And so we got all this information but school then was let out and, and we were left to our own devices and, and we went to the bowling alley, which seems innocuous enough. But as the news starting coming in about the implications of this, we were, we were, we were bowling in this place and now in Nogales on the Arizona side, a lot of kids from the Mexico side would come to school there. Now, they, they had to pay tuition and stuff like — it was not easy, but, uh, but a lot of kids, a lot of families thought that was important and so I went to school with, with, with lots of kids from the other side of the border all the time. And of course when they went home at night, they went home to the Nogales, Sonora side. Well, as we were in the bowling alley, we started getting the phone calls from frantic parents and what a lot of the





world didn't realize is the moment JFK was shot, the borders were closed. Now to us that meant something. But you take that with a grain of salt — the borders being closed was just like the fence being shut. All right. But when they said closed this time, they meant it. And, and they've never opened since, I don't think.

Now what closed meant on that day is that literally parents could not cross the border to come and get their kids. And kids could not go home. These were, you know, fourth, fifth, sixth graders, you know, we're talking about that age level. And for a little while on that afternoon nobody knew what they were going to do. And when a little kid doesn't know what he or she's going to do, your natural response of course is start crying because what else can you do? This is your, this is all that's left to you. But when you start to cry in a bowling alley, like the church where you couldn't make any noise, both, you know, both were echo chambers. Bowling alley was full of noise and most of that noise of course is bowling. But what I'll never forget about that afternoon it came replaced by, by crying. And kids being kids doing all they could do was, was crying. Nobody, nobody knowing what, what do you do? Border's closed, where's, where's my, where's my, where's, where are my parents; how am I going to get home?

And I remember this and I, I, I've asked my mother and father many times in the years since, if this is accurate. They, they said yes, absolutely. My father came to get me at I don't know, four o'clock, four thirty in the afternoon when he would normally come and get me; took me home but then he went back to see what he could do to help. Uh, and by this time he was working — and I'll continue saying what, what his career path was — but, uh, he was working in the court system and thought maybe he could just help in some fashion. You, you know, you go back you're powerless as well but, uh, perhaps he could. But he said, no, the, the border was closed and they brought the kids to the border fence and parents were on the other side of the fence and said — and they were holding onto each other through the fence — mother and child — and they would not let them pass. Until about four or five o'clock in the morning. They were there all night crying, you know, everybody yelling and it's just — these were not the people who shot the President and yet that closed border — because of this large edict, this large pronouncement — was an absolute.

And they of course eventually got back home and, and, uh, and the world moved on, changed. But for us the border that change was, was something extra. And it, and it meant now that the border had been closed, could be closed and in essence would be closed. And that's where I think we are now. It was, it started then. It started then. And, and it started in a big way that, that perhaps so many small mothers and fathers and children could have solved in a better way. Uh, I don't know what that answer would have been but we know that that was not the answer. And yet we've now codified it, closed the border.

**PS:** (Inaudible)

**AR:** Yes, yes. We did not have close family on the other side so we didn't have that kind of situation, uh, where, you know, you were clinging and that sort of stuff. So it wasn't like that at all. But certainly we had friends and, and, uh, other people who were all right in the middle of it. And it was a, a tough moment.



**PS:** Growing up the Nogales on the American side was smaller though —

**AR:** Yeah, considerably smaller and, and it was a, uh, a phenomenon that, that is now magnified from that time, which is to say now, uh, there are maybe 15, 20,000 people, uh, on the Arizona side and—maybe 25,000 — let's use this for easy math — maybe 25,000 on the American side, the American Nogales and probably a quarter of a million people, maybe 250,000, ten times as many on the Nogales, Mexico side. Now if this were a physiological treatise, if we were in the medical profession and looked at that, we'd say that's a stroke or a heart attack, you know, ready to happen if it hasn't already. There's, there isn't any paradigm in science that we can look at that says that's all right. You know, it's, it's a problem, it's a problem. The, the irony of course, too, uh, and this, this actually lent great magic to my work through the years — is when I was growing up the Arizona, the Nogales I knew had a very stable pop-population since the '40s of about 7-8000. And when you look at the demographics it stayed that way up until the '70s, so accord—very stable, uh, population, which is, is relatively remarkable.

I'm going to guess that the Sonora side was also reasonably stable though bigger. Well 8000 people but on any given day — I read these statistics some years ago — on any given day because produce and tourism were the two big industries, uh, in the Nogales area — on any given day 40,000 were passing through. But because they were only there for a day, they were, they were kind of invisible, but of course the Arizona probably had a stable population of 48,000, but 40,000 of them were ghosts, at least on paper. And that, that kind of odd math — are they there? Or are they not there? Do you count them or, or you don't? According to the government you got no support for 40,000, you get supported for eight. Uh, so there was always a scramble for, for support, uh, services and all those kinds of things, uh, for this quote-unquote invisible population that was of course overwhelmingly more visible than the actual inhabitants of the town. And, uh, that kind of — I can, we can characterize that in, in any way we want, uh, very often that's a very humorous idea, but with very serious implications.

Uh, as kids it gave us great theater as you can imagine. Uh, invisible people in Bermuda shorts.

**PS:** As you were growing up did you realize it was a unique place?

**AR:** I, I, I'm, I'm not sure I realized it was a unique place but I, I, I realized that in ways different from so many people I remembered a great deal of my childhood because it was unique. And because even at the time, I, I recognized there was something worth remembering what I was going through. I, I don't know that I would articulate it that way at the time, but something in me kept revisiting different things and, and, and that becomes memory. It becomes things you later write about. And, uh, of course I think every kid thinks that however you're growing up is, is normal. But it didn't take long for me to see good and bad that, uh, if it, if it was normal, we still didn't know what to do with normal. Or how to define it very well. And, and right away of course growing up in the, at the border, I mean I grew up between languages, I grew up between cultures, between foods, between, you know, radically different kitchen tables. You know, what do you, what do you see in a table? We think of that as a, a, a normal thing. But it's not. People



set this very differently, different foods, different ways to think about the world.

And, uh, if you're living on the border you embrace them all because that, that, that is your world. It is, it is made up of all of these things, not simply one. Well, in, in large measure so much of my first language — you know I've said this through the years — my, my first language was in essence Spanish because except for my mother, I was living in a world in which, which everybody was, was completely conversant, uh, in Spanish. My, all my relatives, friends growing up, everybody else.

Uh, my mother was a little bit of an outsider of course on, an all accounts and even as kids, my brother and it recognized that, though I'm not sure we, uh, thought much about it. Except that when I was a little kid apparently I called — my brother and I both — we called my mother Agnes rather than mother because that's how everybody else referred to my mother and we had enough of a sense of her being an outsider that we called her Agnes a lot of times. And actually we called her mother down, a woman who lived down the street — I grew up on Rodriguez Street behind the Catholic Church in Nogales, uh, which is a, a for the early part of my life — we called the lady down the street Mama because she did the kinds of things — she had a big family. We would go down there too, we'd just eat dinner with her and just kind of blend in and it's the large we were talking about earlier. But what I remember is she'd do something that my mother would never do — she'd give us boxes of Jell-O to eat right out of the box. Which we thought, “Oh, man that's what moth— good mothers ought to do.”

And, and so there was — we still have a lot of fond memories of that. Uh, but, but I think all of that life and that richness which really gave me my life as a writer in that it gave me life of perspective from the very beginning. I knew that everything had more than one way, more than one name. And if it had more than one name, that meant that everything had more than one way to be imagined to be configured; to be conceived of. Uh, and if you've got more than one way to think of something; more than one way to refer to it, by definition that's perspective. And perspective we know on balance is a pretty good thing. And it gave me a, a, a kind of dimensionality about the world that was not one-dimensional but multi-dimensional. And we say multicultural and multilingual and all these words but it was about dimensions. It helped me see the depth in things all the time. If only because I could call it by two different names. You know hand and *mano*, you know, two diff—two different ways to say the same thing. Well, how can you say, how can it be two different things? Eventually you figure out well, I've got to, I've got to think about that. That was exciting I mean, that, that, that as a kid you're ready to eat that stuff up. You're, you want to think about the world and you're, you're always looking to discover stuff.

On balance you'd rather it was treasure you were discovering, but discovering things about the world works pretty well, as, you know knowledge is a treasure in and of itself.

Well this works well, and, and, and, and suited me till I got to first grade. And this was, you know, border in the 1950s and I know people's hearts were in the right places but, uh, some things happened. And we got to the first grade classroom though, though we were all I'm sure probably speaking Spanish or some mélange of, of, of English and Spanish and Yaqui, which is another Native, Native Mexican and American



group. Uh, I didn't realize how much Yaqui language was in this, what I thought of as Spanish or just in my regular vocabulary as a kid. Uh, and border language — all of that was all mixed up.

But I know that one of the first things we were told when we got into first grade is, “you can't speak Spanish.” Well, we all looked at each other raised our hands and said, “Uh, *seguro que sí*.” Of course we can speak Spanish, just listen. Teacher said “that's not what, what, what I mean. You are not to speak Spanish and if you do, you're going to get swatted.” Well nobody wants to get swatted and everybody wanted what we saw in that first grade classroom. We were first graders; it was our job to want what was in that room. We wanted the clay and the cubbyholes and, uh, uh, you know, finger paints and the kickballs. And if took speaking English or learning English, ‘okay then, that's what you have to do here to get this stuff. We could do that. How long could it take, you know, two weeks tops. We could do that.’ We were kids and, and, and we probably thought that. And we did it.

But because we were kids and we weren't dumb no matter what labels got put on kids because they, they either didn't learn as quickly or, or had different issues with that — we didn't just learn that. This, this is the thing that's always amazed me about going to school and especially at that particular time. And, uh, really I, I think I can say it just about school now. We didn't just learn that. We were good kids, we were smart kids. Our parents said, ‘respect your teachers.’ The term, the term ‘*maestro*’ in Spanish, which is the word for teacher is a very big word and it has nothing to do with the school building. It was to do with anybody who teaches you something. So *maestro* meant something. You listened to what your teacher says and your teacher is God. That's how we were raised and so many kids I know were raised the same way.

Well okay we also were taught that you're going to get hit for something bad — We were just kids you know and this was the '50s and you know, “Wait till your father gets home.” And, and, you know, dad comes home; this is the days when dads would whip off their belts and chase you around the house and — it wasn't as bad as it sounded. I, I know people got carried away with that and, and I'm sorry for that and I hope that is at an end. But, but this was a different time and it, it was scare tactic as much as anything. But, but we were scared nonetheless as we should be. I mean we wanted to do good things. We wanted to do the right things. We were taught that we should respect our teachers.

**PS:** Did you have favorite subjects that (inaudible) good student.

**AR:** Well I, I was a good student, uh, by default. Uh, I was just interested in the world and that ultimately made me a good student. I'm not sure I was interested in school. Uh, starting from second grade I, I, I in fact got in trouble and this is a, this is a very big deal — but it also gave me a wonderful lesson. My parents, uh, gave me a lot of good lessons; this is one of the most stark in that I, I, uh, loved listening to what teacher said about explorers and all that kind of stuff. And we were in Coronado Elementary School, big explorer. But as a second grader you're, you're getting all of this great information and I know what I wanted to do with it, which was something. I wanted to get up and go explore, I wanted to go, you know, find something. But of course I couldn't cross the street without holding somebody's hand, which puts a





crimp in your explorer plans at that age. And instead you're told, you know, here's all of this information now everybody take a nap; put your head down.

Well this was a very difficult thing for me and I, uh; I remember my elementary school classroom had great big windows. So I, I was a good student I did my work, but I also committed the egregious crime of daydreaming. Now this, this did get me in trouble even though I did all my work. And my second grade teacher, Miss Lee, who I actually loved — called my parents in to discuss this. And my parents of course took this very seriously. They came in, they didn't know what the situation was but to have your teacher call your parents in was a big deal. So they came in and I remember they were sitting in little kid chairs. Miss Lee was sitting in the teacher chair and I was, uh, relegated to the corner as if I weren't there. And Miss Lee says, "Well your son, you know, he's a very good student. I like him a lot." And so on and so on "But he's been daydreaming." My parents are nodding their heads. Hmm, daydreaming. Everybody nodded their head and so okay and we all got up and I thought oh, boy I'm in trouble now. She, you know, she told them what I'd be doing and clearly this is a problem.

But daydreaming of course was what a second grader can do with all of that information. While I could not go out and discover a new country, I could in here. This is where I could do something with all of the things that I was learning in that second grade classroom. This is where I could actively engage information and make it mean something. But of course to the outside world and if you're a second grader it looks like daydreaming. I think this is the beginning of my writing, which is to say, 'thinking.'

Now my parents — we got out, we went back, we got in the car and you know, at this time — late '50s, early '60s by this point cars are big and you're a little kid and you're sitting in the back seat all by yourself and you're in trouble; back seat seems even bigger; you seem even smaller and you're sitting there and you're waiting for your parents to yell at you or do whatever they're going to do. And then you know, but they didn't say a thing. We drove home; I thought this is it, no dinner. But my mother made dinner. And I thought oh, no TV and this was — we had just gotten a TV and we were the first in the neighborhood. It was one of those stories where everybody in the neighborhood would come in to see, you know, there were, there were like two things on. And everybody in the neighborhood, all the kids would come in to see, I, I think it was Laurel and Hardy, which is what they would run in, in the evening. And we'd, everybody would come from the neighborhood to see it. But my parents let us watch Laurel and Hardy and I thought oh, no, uh, they're going to do it before bed and I'm going to have nightmares and this is going to be terrible. But they didn't. And in fact my parents never said a thing. And it took me a while as a, as a young boy to figure out what that meant.

But I understood and I've understood through the years that there was nothing to say to me. And it was that clear. And so they didn't. And, uh, I've always thought what a great lesson; what a great to do it. A little anxiety on my part but, but it was a good lesson. There was nothing to say and I was not in trouble and I was not doing something wrong. And that's all there was to it. It wasn't worth talking about.

**PS:** When did you start writing?



**AR:** Well, I, I think my writing, physical writing, uh, happened probably as it did with most, uh, most adolescents, junior high school, high school. But it was a, uh, it was a mystery to me in that I did it in the beginning in the backs of my notebooks. Now the paradigm for that is, you're getting in trouble; you're, you're trouble making because the front of the notebook is what you're supposed to do. That's where you do your homework, that's when you go to the back of your notebook as a junior high school kid, you're looking for trouble cause you're about to pull out a piece of paper to make a spit wad to throw at somebody or you're going to write a note to your girlfriend or you're going to do something with the back of that notebook that's going to somebody in trouble; probably you.

For me it was writing. And what was intriguing about that is I literally didn't know what it was. I just knew it was worth doing. The reason I didn't know what it was and, and I couldn't ask anybody, which seems a little strange today even to me. I go to schools all over the place, I talk to kids who are writing, I try to help them with their writing and stuff like that. There was no such thing back then, but I'm not sure that was a bad thing, in that I knew that what I was doing while it may not have had a name and, and, and what could it have been? It was not poetry, which is a word I don't even know that I had really in junior high or even high school because poetry is whatever you got in the books by whatever English poet wrote whatever you thought you were studying back then. It was a very skewed, uh, notion of, of that. So I wouldn't have even thought to call it that. It wasn't, uh, science, it wasn't math, it was just words that I wanted to remember.

And for no reason that I could really even grasp at the moment I was writing them. I just knew, oh, this is, this is okay. And I wrote it down. And what's important to me about that and why I know this is the beginning of my writing is, I couldn't show it to anybody because I didn't know what it was. But I knew there was, it was growing. I, I couldn't show it to my teachers because, which one? If it wasn't poetry or the English teacher; if it wasn't science, if it wasn't — who do I show it to? And why would I? I couldn't show it to my parents because that's the rule of being a kid. And I couldn't show it to my friends because I knew they weren't doing that. And, you know, by high school certainly I knew there was a, kind of a ready-made vocabulary for somebody who might be writing, uh, maybe poetry. And that was junk. Why, why would anybody want to invite that kind of name-calling or that kind of stuff?

So what I recognize now is I was writing because I needed to write. And this was the test of it; this was the proof of it that I wasn't writing for a grade. I wasn't writing to please my parents and I wasn't writing to impress my friends. So what was I doing? And I still don't know the answer to that but it doesn't mean there isn't an answer. I knew even then, it was worth doing. Uh, it was making its own rules as it went. And that became increasingly exciting to me. The backs of my notebooks started to get bigger and bigger. You know eclipsing the front of the notebook and pretty soon that was it. That's how I started writing and, uh, that almost magical nature. It, it was almost a reflection of what, what happened in, in second grade. It was just thinking or registering that there were things going on. That I might not know what it meant yet but that I needed to start taking notes cause something was happening.



And it has served me well, uh, ever since. To, to —

**PS:** Save all those notes?

**AR:** You know, somewhere toward the end of high school as you are at that age, of course you save everything and you, you kind of carry it all around with you. I was at a bus stop and I went to get some water and I came back and somebody had stolen all my books, including all that writing. And I was devastated for, for three maybe four minutes because I also registered such a feeling of freedom that I didn't know what to do with that either. But I was sorry, I was really sorry I didn't have all that writing. And it was my life; it was everything. But somehow it was all right. I had done it, it was okay. And I, although — keep in mind I'm still talking about that day. So it was a big deal. I'm, I'm, I'm down playing it. It was a big deal but it gave me room, it gave me room to do more, to do something different and to start over. And that was all right, it was all right.

**PS:** As you were growing up with your brother who was with the forest service and

**AR:** Yeah.

**PS:** — fire fighting. What did you want to do when you grew up? Did you also (inaudible)?

**AR:** Uh, not in the least. I didn't think about the world that way and it was sort of take it as it comes. And so I, I didn't think about end games. I didn't think about anything. I was such a process person. Everything, whatever I was doing at the moment was, was great; I liked doing it. And this is a little dangerous because you can, you can — especially if you're good at what you're doing — any one of those can side track you or take you in that direction and, and I did a lot of jobs and I did them well and, and could have gone in all of those directions. Uh, and I'll talk about that in just a moment but, but let me just — you know the first place you really get asked about this seriously aside from your parents and friends is when you go first day to college. Cause you know you've got to declare a major.

The, uh, the, the — college for me was an interesting experience because coming out of Nogales, which was in some fashion largely a vocational experience. Uh, everybody was not going off to university when, in, in, in this particular high school and, and in fact the dropout rates were, were astounding even then. I, I can only guess that there, there equally, uh, dramatic probably worse. Uh, the only way for me to think — because I didn't have to worry about am I going to apply to Stanford or — you know, NYU, Jo— I didn't know what they were. I didn't know how to apply to university because I didn't get that kind of counseling or advice; I wasn't in a situation where, where that was just, that was not the expertise that, that was there. And so you were to some extent left on your own.

I had done well in high school. I had done very well; I got some, some scholarships and, uh, gotten a scholarship to U of A, University of Arizona in Tucson. And that seemed pretty good, uh, and it was just up the road and that's what I did. And even to this day I recognize that what it was for me and, and



probably this was a, a saving grace for somebody coming from a small town, not quite sure what to expect, how to handle a big university; how to make that leap from the high school I was in to that university. My mind set was, was very clear. My mindset was, was very clear, 13<sup>th</sup> Grade, that's all it was. And because there wasn't all of the attendant neon of anxieties of, of, you know, test scores, of all that sort of stuff, it let me just move on with what I, I, I, wanted to do. Which wasn't clear yet, but I just knew I wanted to do things.

And when I went to U of A, of course, they asked you to declare your major and you, you have no idea what, what your major's going to be so they assign you — back then — they assign you an advisor. Now this is before computers and you had to go to every teacher to get these little cards and creating a schedule was a, a, weeklong kind of thing. This was before it was even localized in the gymnasium. You had to go to every department and just go around.

Well, I was assigned a political science advisor. I go in and, and, uh, uh, he says, “well, what do you think you'd like to major in?” And I said, “Well, I don't know.” He said, “Well, let's, let's look at some things.” They didn't have undeclared, they had to write something down. He says, “How would you like to be an astronomy major?” And I said, “Well, what's that?” “Well you study the stars.” I said, “that's all right.” Thumbing through the catalog, “botany. How about a botany major?” “Well, what is that?” “Well you study plants.” “Oh, that sounds pretty good.” He's thumbing through and he gives me a one sentence little summary of everything in the whole catalog. Then we get to the “Ps” — political science. And I said, “well that sounds good; what's that?” And then he launches into an hour-long explanation of what glories there are in majoring in political science. So of course I walked out a political science major. And just by coincidence several other friends I had who also got assigned advisors ended up majoring in what their advisors were. So you can see how the beginnings of this play out.

But, and, and that was, and that was fine. I mean I, I think you're in a university setting different from other kinds of educational settings. What you do your first two years, are, are, are basically, uh, Whitman's Sampler. You're, you're trying a little bit of everything. So what your major is you don't actually get to even do it till, you know, especially back then, till your junior year really.

Uh, so it was all right and I was enjoying it. And then computers seemed to get invented. And I was getting ready for my junior year as I recall and it was the first time you could — there was this brand new word, pre-register. Well that summer I was in my bedroom with my friends and we were all doing what probably everybody else in the world was doing that summer, who was going to university, we were looking through the catalog for classes. But not just any classes, we were looking for the mythical easiest classes we could find. Uh, cause we had learned how to play school and, and, you know, I, there's, there's that aspect to it.

Although what I was about to choose would in essence change my life. I got to English department, which was really the last place on earth I thought I was going to go. I, I had had a, you know, English 101, 102 — who likes those? But I get into the English department and then I find English 9 – Introduction to





Poetry Writing. Nothing sounds engaging to me yet until I get to the last line in that course's particular description, that particular year. At the end of it, it said, "No Final." I said that's the class for me. I signed up for English 9 – Introduction to Poetry Writing. This, I loved this English 9, it wasn't English 2000 and whatever, like they are now; and English 10 – Introduction to Fiction Writing. Also "No Final." Great.

But the trick was on me, of course. Uh, no final because you're doing it the whole way through. But a moment of reckoning came that pushed in a direction I, I, I kept going in. And it, it was particularly true in my, my poetry class. This would have been, you know, early '70s, sitting in this Introduction to Poetry class; everybody sitting on top of their tables, reading poems going, "That's groovy." You know or whatever we said — that's probably what we said, you know, 'that's groovy.' And you go through your first month, you're just listening to stuff and you're going, you're nodding your head a lot and it's really cool and whatever. And then the teacher said something that I'll never forget. "All right now, go write one." Well, that seemed easy enough and I had done well up to know and had learned how to play school. You go write something, you know, how hard could that be? You get asked to do a report on Benjamin Franklin, you go to the encyclopedia, you find the article on Benjamin Franklin; you copy it, change a few words and you turn it in. How hard is that. Or you gotta write a course, class, you gotta write a report on, uh, Venus. So you go to your astronomy teacher, you get some little tidbits; you put them into — okay. You're, you're doing your math homework, the answers are in the back of the book. Come on, you just make all the work add up to that. You had learned how to play school.

But in this class I learned — among other words — a very important word: plagiarism. I said, oh that's a concept. What I mean I can't copy it out of the encyclopedia. Isn't that what the encyclopedia is for? I couldn't copy anybody's work. I couldn't ask anybody else how to do it, cause they didn't do it. And, uh, I couldn't buy it. All, all of the things you'd learn to do as a student, changed. That is to say, school had always come from the outside into me. And for the first time and this was the moment, and I know it was the moment — school was going to actually have to come from me and move out. And at that moment to think that I had something that might constitute the homework that I turned in as opposed to just hitting the tennis ball back all the time, changed me. It changed how I thought about school; it changed my relationship to school. And it helped me see I was in the right place.

So of course I did what anybody would do in my situation — I wrote a poem, in Spanish, so nobody would understand it. A perfect defense mechanism. Uh, teacher saw through it and it was, I, I think I had a good teacher for that particular moment at the time. It was just a capillary action; it was a meeting place. I needed to figure out how to get in to that.

And you know this would be echoed for me many years later — I'd be doing a residency in Eloy that, that — Eloy's on the grow. I love Eloy. Eloy was our nemesis in, in, in, in sports — they always beat us. But I was doing a, a, a residency in Eloy and I was working with two classes and one was their gifted class and there — we were having a great time and the fire alarm went off and nobody wanted to leave. That's how we knew how good a time it was having. But I was also working with another class that was the opposite of the gifted class. And it was — and on top of it there had been, there was a substitute teacher who didn't



want to be there. Who, when I came I think this was probably illegal, actually left the class and let me take over. And at the back of this classroom there was a group of maybe six or seven students playing poker. This was a difficult class. But I knew this classroom. And, you know, a lot of farm workers in the Eloy area and it's a tough life and a lot of the kids playing poker, you know, they were, uh, uh, you know, dressed in their high school uniforms which are variants of tough guy looks and we were doing — but, but I knew how to do it — and I was working with this group of maybe three students in the front and we were doing some things and some good stuff was happening and whatever. I was there for a week. And on the Thursday of that week one of the guys who was playing poker, got up with a pencil and he got up ostensibly to come and sharpen it. We, this was toward the end of class, we'd already finished and he'd, you know, I knew what was happening — they were listening. And that's all right. That's a kind of language too. And in fact that's our more honest first language. We always talk about language that comes out of us rather than language that, that comes into our ears. He'd been listening and as he came up to the front of the class to sharpen his pencil, sort of so nobody else could see, he came up to me and said, "hey, *Orale bato.*" And I said, yeah, yeah, what's up? And he says, "So." And he used a word I'm not going to repeat, I'll just say stuff. "So, you really like this poetry stuff?" "It's what I do." "So," he said and then he asked me a question and I understood just what he said but I don't think anybody else would have, and it's because of how I grew and where I grew up and remember that first poem I wrote. And he said to me, "So, how many fights you had?"

Now what he was asking me was and I knew it the moment he asked, how do I get from here to there? And his only mechanism for asking was his own experience: How many fights you had? And how many fights does it take to do what you're doing? And I told him, "Just one," I said, "like you." Shook his head went back and sat down and I can only hope that he's never forgotten that moment the same way that I've never forgotten it. I knew what he was asking me. And I think I was showing him the answer. And he had no reason to believe me except that moment in which I had to do and say something just very honest. It's a life-long fight; it's just one. It's a good one, you know, but it's not all of those fights that you're having. It's something bigger. And, and so I, I knew that my teacher must have seen something like that when I turned that poem in.

And so, you know, pretty soon I started figuring out this was all right. And I changed my major from political science to — and I never would have imagined this, cause I had struggled with all these languages and getting swatted and the whole, you know, and — English major, creative writing, you know, whatever, whatever it was.

And then, uh, came close to graduating and, you know, I was doing great, this was fine, it was all right. And I'll never forget going into the English Department chair's office, uh, the semester right as I was graduating. And I said, "So what kind of job, you know, where, where do I get job?" This was before we had Job Fairs and all that — this was the old days, you know. "What kind of a job?" And he said, "Oh," he said, "An English degree it's good for so many things." I said, "Great, like what?" He says, "We don't like to get that specific." I'll never forget that answer and how useless that was, but metaphorically I guess it was okay. I mean maybe I was in the right department, I don't know.



After, after that, after asking him that though and understanding that it was, I thought well, okay, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to go to law school because that seems to be like a good decision although I hadn't gotten any particular advice on that. I just knew that was something that, that, uh, English majors did. And I went, uh, went across the way to apply to Law School. But it was still an early time and, and you know I had missed the notice in my box or something but I didn't know you had to take an LSAT exam and you know, do an essay and get letters of — I didn't know you to do that and the time had already gone by and they only accepted on the year. So I was out of luck. But I wasn't daunted. I wasn't, I wasn't going to be stopped, I just knew I couldn't get into Law School that year so, I, I just went back to school and got another degree. Got a degree this time in Psychology.

As I applied to Law School — and I got into Law School the following year. And, and everything was fine. This was great I had two degrees now. I was in Law School, my parents were proud of me. My friends were already asking for advice and everything was good. And I got through the first year of Law School and Law School — the hardest part of Law School is getting in and with good reason. It, it helps you, it, the testing at the beginning tells you whether you're going to be able to do it. After that you just do it. And, and, uh, I was doing it. Which meant I could do it. And at the end of that first year everything seeming so right, I was faced by its counterpoint — realization. I could do it. Did I want to do it? And it was very tough.

And I remember calling my parents saying, you know, I'm thinking about qui-qui — I couldn't even say it. Everything had been so good and, and suddenly I was so well positioned and thinking about quitting Law School. And we talked about it and I said what do you think? And they said you've never disappointed us. They said, "Whatever you decide is fine with us." Thanks a lot, that's no help at all. But again it, it was sort of reminiscent of that moment when now the decision wasn't going to come from the out— nobody was going to tell me what to do, I had to — now I had all of the makings, I had all of the ingredients. I had to make the decision.

And what I realized is that I wasn't quitting Law School, I had quit writing and it was time to go back. And it took trying everything I knew I could do to show me what I wanted to do. And even though Law School had every carrot to dangle — and I would have been good at it I think — every carrot to dangle including financial and everything else. And poetry particularly, I mean, I went on to write other things but had nothing to dangle except itself. I knew that's what I both could and wanted to do. And so I went back and finished out my terminal degree in, in that and great things happened. So I think it was a, a very good, very pivotal choice and what it was what I tell my students now though it was an informed choice. I, I, I tried the things I could do and, and it was important to, to do that. I do wish I'd finished Law School; it wouldn't hurt. But, but I also knew, uh, that you do what you do. Whatever you, whatever label there is over that, don't be fooled, don't be fooled.

**PS:** So did you think at that point, how, how would you make a living as a poet?



**AR:** Well, uh, I had that great obliviousness that comes with being a student. Uh, I lived hand to mouth, I didn't have, I mean I worked in the library, I worked in — I had worked, uh, you know this is where, you can get distracted and if you're good at what you do. I had worked actually at the hospital in Nogales, every summer and every break and I filled in for everybody. So I, I, I mean I — and I should never had done those surgeries — but I literally filled in for everybody who would go on vacation. And I, I got to know how the whole hospital worked and I did everything — my favorite job was switchboard. It was an old trunk switchboard with the, the plugs and, you know, I loved that. It was great. And I would get to, to, uh, the, the, you know, "Paging Doctor," you know, "Paging Dr. Moody," you know. And, and I would — my favorite thing was to read the prayers — Catholic hospital I get to read the prayer at six o'clock every evening. And they had this little thing printed out for you to read. And you'd read it in English and in Spanish. But I started embellishing. And that ended up being just a lot of fun. I could tell, this was, this was good.

And by the end of the, uh, time there I got offered a job as, as assistant administrator if I wanted the job, if I — cause I knew how to do everything and how it all worked. And I wrote, I wrote the, uh, the, uh, personnel book and different things for the hospital so I, I really did know how it worked and how do a lot of the things and how it all, uh, as an organism should work. But you know that idea of organism has become very important to me. If you learn one thing you know, you know something else. And if you learn how to write a complete sentence you know how to do an equation, you know how to do, you know, some chemistry, you know how to do other things. Uh, so, I — that interrelatedness has always been intriguing to me and, and has been very useful.

Well when I thought about whether or not poetry would sustain me, I, I guess I honestly did not think about what kind of a job it would get me and that probably was a great gift I gave to myself. Cause if I had, I, I could not have gone in that direction. But I also, I also knew that, uh, that if you do anything well, you're going to be okay. And, and I've tried to live by that. And I think it's worked out.

**PS:** Had you ever considered going into medicine? You worked at the hospital —

**AR:** Well —

**PS:** —seem a logical —

**AR:** Uh, my family both my mother and my father family, uh, — my mother was a nurse for all those years I was around this. And my father's family, uh, many people in our family are in medicine so it would have made a lot of sense. Uh, and I, I, I'm sure it was a consideration but it struck me that there were lots of ideas about what medicine could be. And you help people in a lot of ways. And that writing could be part of that.

**PS:** So you went on to — went back and major in Poetry or Writing?





**AR:** Yeah, right, right. It was — and I was, and I was — it was the MFA, it was the terminal degree in Creative Writing and my emphasis starting in there was Poetry although I, I did both the Poetry and the Fiction course of study. So I did it all.

**PS:** At the U of A?

**AR:** Yes, uh-huh.

**PS:** So what, what your first job after you got that degree?

**AR:** Well, after I got — I was already a teaching assistant so I had a little bit of a taste of teaching in the in university setting. But then, uh, uh, as, just before I graduated I, I got into Artist In Education which back then was called Poets in the Schools Program. That's how I ended up visiting Eloy and so on like that. And this was quite a wonderful job and it helped me learned to articulate what I did as an artist in ways that would become very useful to me later as I went into university setting. Cause if you, uh, can explain to a fourth grader what you do , you're going to do okay, you know.

Uh, I, I, uh, went all over the state going to, to all sorts of venues and, and I, I increasingly did more and more of this. And so I, I just was, uh, kind of going all over doing, uh, it's hard to explain the work because you only go in for a week at a time. But it was like a blaze of lightening so it was always intensity, it was always new and it was always exciting. And I was thriving on that. But I would come home and of course then on the weeks I wasn't working, I'd write and I, I had some very good luck in that I, I had a very, uh, fortuitous happen right after I graduated I, I won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, which back then was \$10,000. Which, you know, there's, there's an old joke about NEA cars, but in point of fact, I bought a car. But what that let me so was travel all over the state to do this thing that I was doing. And it ended up being a huge part of what would later be my career. And so that, that grant allowed me to take a little — I didn't have to look for an immediate job.

My wife was working, she was a librarian and so she was working and, and I, we just agreed then I would just move wherever she got her job. And her first job out, out of school was in Florence, Arizona. And she was the, uh, working as a librarian there. So we were living in Florence but I was traveling all over the state. Then in about, uh, at the end of, at the end of — I did this for, for, a year.

Uh, and then in about 1980, uh, through the Arizona Commission on the Arts and this Poets in the Schools Program and we found a partner in Central Arizona College — I started something that became a — had some national profile. I started a community writer-in-residence program and it was based on the agricultural extension agent model. Agricultural Extension Agent, I'd grown up with and anybody in a rural setting knows if you've got some problem with your crops, you call in the agent who's gonna exam the crop or take it back and get, get some analysis of it. Tell you what to put in your soil; how to raise better cattle; how to help you with things.



Well, what I recognized is that everybody cannot go to a classroom. And, and writing has very little relationship to a classroom; it has some but mostly you write where you write. And that it was a silly notion to think that could only happen in a classroom. And in fact, it probably quite likely is not where it was happening. That maybe is where you get some training; but the writing was happening everywhere. And that if I could think of a new educational model that took what the classroom should offer but find a new way to do it. Remember this is before distance learning and computer classes. I said well rather than everybody coming to my classroom, what would happen if I went to them? And if we created a class or the idea something like that but like an agricultural extension agent, I would just go.

And that's what I did for, for two years, uh, still living in Florence and then later in, in Globe. Uh, I, I would go to — it was, this was in Pinal County — and I, I went all over that county. I worked with ranch wives, who were writing memoirs. I worked in libraries; I worked in elementary schools; I worked with creative writing clubs. I went where I was needed and where I could make a difference in the specific not the abstract. It wasn't a big class. It was how do I work this sentence so that it says what I need it to say. How do I do this? How do — and it changed my thinking about what an effective classroom is forever. Uh, it reminded me that we're all individuals. And that writing is, has always been based on an apprenticeship model, not a Socratic model. We don't, you can't tell people how to do it. It's like typing. I mean I can tell somebody how to type and they will understand me but they can't go home and type. You've got to practice it. And that practice, you gotta, you gotta work on that and somebody's got to help you by looking at that and so on. And you can do a certain amount of this on your own, it's true, but you also can, can be helped. And that's what this helped me to do and it helped me help a lot of people in some very specific ways. And there were some great stories that came out of it. People went on to some writing careers and went on to get MFAs. They went into programs and, and, uh, those are good things.

Uh, that came to a kind of a, and end when, uh, I won a big national award, the Walt Whitman Award which was one of the two major national prizes for a first book in poetry. And it was a very big deal and what has always been wonderful about that is, uh, I won it — oh, and when I won it, I was living in Globe, Arizona, which felt like, you know, if you're here it's not the middle of nowhere. But in, in a national scene it kind of felt like the middle of nowhere. I didn't know anybody, I didn't know the writing world in, in terms of all of the who do you hobnob with and — didn't work that way for me. I was just writing. I was writing, not talking about it, right.

And I got this call and it was from the Academy of American Poets, Mrs. Hugh Bullock, who was the director then, who said she had some good news from me, for me and she'd like to say that I had won the Walt Whitman Award. And I said, oh, that's really great. She says, "Now I have to ask you not to tell anybody for two weeks so that we can create some publicity around this. Now you gotta promise me," she said, "Nobody, you can't tell anybody for two weeks." I said okay. And we hung up and then I realized wait a minute, was this real? And I hadn't gotten her call, a call back phone number; I was just, you know, just amazed at the moment. And realized for two weeks I just didn't know if it was true. And I couldn't call the Academy because it would tip them off, you know or whatever, you know whatever you go through your mind. But I went through this two weeks with some delicious agony, uh, that, uh, that I'll never



forget.

But I had — I won this award and it was a, a pivotal career kind of award, very good. And not very long afterward this is, this is a wonderful story cause it can't happen this way anymore. But ASU called me and asked me if I'd like a job. And I allowed as how I probably would. And, uh, I've been there for 22 years. So it was a good, uh, nice start, you know.

**PS:** Back up a little bit; how did you get that first book published? Getting a book published isn't an easy thing.

**AR:** Well when I won the award publication was part of, of the award. So they, they actually published, uh, the, the, I got the award and they, they, uh, had — they found a publisher and they, they did it.

**PS:** So how did they know you had written it if it hadn't been published?

**AR:** I entered the cont — no, I entered the contest. I was, I was entering contests, I was sending stuff out. And I, and, and that sounds like it was, uh, black and white; it wasn't. I mean I was publishing individual works, poems and stories and I was already very prolific and I had been a finalist in a, a number of contests and stuff. So, uh, while I, I, you know, had no way to gauge what all that meant, it, it finally did add up. And so they, they had the manuscript and, and the, the judge for that award who died just recently I'm very sorry to say — Donald Justice, Pulitzer prize winning, major American voice in, in American poetry.

Uh, a number of years later he visited ASU and he asked to meet with me. And he told me something that has helped me, uh, a great deal and it, it's not a self-serving story. This is, I don't and I don't mean it that way. It's helped me as I've gone on to, to be on panels where I've judged other books and, and, and, and been in that world of, of, uh, choosing. He took me aside and he said, "Now you know that award you won?" I said yes I do. "I'd like to tell a little bit about how that happened," he said. "Now, the award you know had thousands of applications, all these manuscripts from all over the, all over the world." He said, "Now I didn't read all those." They had readers, they, you know, a judge doesn't read all those. I, I, I had no idea how this worked, you know. He says, "But they, they sent me," he said, "something like a hundred. I read through those," he said. "And right away that broke down to 14 that I knew anyone of those 14 would have been a good choice. I read them again," he said. "And it came down to two: yours," he says. "I'd never heard of you, didn't know you; never read anything by you," he says. "I'd never read any of your poems; didn't know a thing about you," he said. "And the other manuscript," he said, "which I knew inside and out, a former student of mine," he said. "And I had every reason to choose that manuscript," he said. "I knew what it would have meant to that person. I, I know what a difference in the career it would have made. I knew it was a good choice and I, you know, my star student," he said. "But yours was better." I never forgot that. And the integrity that he brought to that moment has always stayed with me. Always. Uh, very, very tough choice for him. The other choice would have made so many lives so much better in his sphere. It'd have made a lot of sense; he had every confidence on it in, in that manuscript and I was a total "X" factor. But that's what he said and, uh, pretty good thing to hear.



**PS:** Do you remember the first time did have something published?

**AR:** Oh, well it's a similar story and, and I'm a little embarrassed, but it, it, these were the things that of course are the engines that, that, that keep you going. And, uh, I, I the first real — let me quote-unquote real, major kind of thing I had published. I was an undergraduate in one of these poetry classes and I, I was, you know, writing what I was writing. And I had a teacher who said, "You know you're, you're doing okay. And I've got a friend who's putting together a, a poetry anthology. And it's a big deal, it's a big thing," he says. "And I think he'd like some of your work, you ought to send him some." This and I didn't realize this at the time but this was a very big deal to have a teacher sort of encourage you that way. So I, uh, I took it to heart but I had no idea how to do that. So I pretty much probably got my, all my 40 poems or whatever I had, I didn't know how you send something out. Put them all in an envelope, sent them off to him with a little letter saying you know I hope you find something interesting. And this is before I was sending work out or really knew how the, the whole field worked. And I didn't hear anything for a very long time and I forgot about it. And maybe six months later I got the whole packet back. It was this man Edward Field, who, you know, was just a fine man, fine poet, New York, in New York. And it didn't, I got a note from, from him and it said, "I'm really sorry the anthology deal fell through. I really liked your work but this is how, this what it works. If anything happens I'll let you know." Well that's all right, that's great, nice of him to write back.

The next day I got a postcard in the mail from him. And it said, "send everything back, nothing's changed but I can't, but I can't forget the work, I'll do what I can." That was the post card. So I send it all back and literally a year later I got in the mail a little package with a Bantam Books poetry anthology called *A Geography of Poets* and I thought oh that's, that's nice, it must be a freebie they're giving out to everybody in the department, whatever. I opened it up and glancing through it casually and suddenly there I am. Now it's a little odd that he didn't tell me that he had that, you know, picked some things and that stuff. Uh, but what a moment of grace, what a moment of sheer feeling to have, to open it up and it wasn't the promise of publication, it was right in my hand. And, uh, that was all right; that felt good. That was the first thing that I, I think really, uh, was the first sort of big deal, uh, not mimeographed kind of publication. And, and it came with a really good story, you know.

**PS:** So the first time you actually had book \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_, was through the Walt Whitman Award?

**AR:** I, I had had the, in, in poetry there's a kind of book called a "chap book." Comes from the Middle English "sheep book," which I'm sure has nothing to do with anything, but in fact today means a, a, uh, very often, hand-set letter press kind of fine art book. And I had had, uh, two small chap books — what's interesting about those is they, they do come as books if you need them to in applying for a job, but they don't count as your first book to, in contests and stuff like that. So my first actual book, full book is, was the one that, called *Whispering to Fool the Wind*, that won that Whitman Award. Yeah that was the first book.





**PS:** So that what sort of changed your career; that's what made ASU notice you?

**AR:** It is, yes, yes, yeah. It's, it's, that was the power of that particular, you know, thing.

**PS:** Have you ever thought about teaching combining teaching with writing (inaudible)?

**AR:** Well, it, it just sort of spilled over. I mean I was always excited thinking; that became writing and talking about writing became teaching. So I don't think of it in very ne—or, or very clearing defined ways. And I don't think I set out in any way to become a teacher. I never set out to do that and in fact if anything when I teach, it's what I didn't get taught. So I think of myself in that sense of, as a kind of anti-teacher, you know — that's not a, that's not a major comment on my, on teachers. It's just what, what is, what is somebody else not teaching? And it's helped me find what I, what I want to do and, and it's called teaching but I think it's, it could comfortably be called a lot of things. But it, it was never a neat pathway. And it was never something I, I, uh, had in mind to do.

**PS:** So how do you describe yourself (inaudible)?

**AR:** Oh,

**PS:** (Inaudible)

**AR:** Well I, I probably stammer a little bit and I just pretty much say I'm a writer and I teach at ASU. I write and I teach and, uh, the rest of it takes care of itself. I think, you know, I think that's plenty to say. I write and I teach.

**PS:** That's pretty broad

**AR:** Yes it is, yes it is. But I write broadly and I, you know, I, I, it covers a lot of territory. Uh, I think there's, there's this point at which, you know, I, personally, uh, even though I write short stories and, and prose and novel and, and non-fiction and so on and have had a lot of success in those areas, all my writing is poetry. And, uh, when I say writing I mean poetry and so when I say I'm a writer though this is hard to explain to the world. I think what I'm saying is a poet. It's a difficult thing. It's, that's not a, that's not a, an easy word to lay on the world you know. It's just, uh, but I think that's the truth.

**PS:** Poetry, that word puts people off?

**AR:** It does, and I think it comes with baggage. And I don't intend it to; it ought to be new every time. It's new every time for me. Uh, but that's not what that word does so, it, it's been tired out a little bit and, uh, it needs a little resting time probably.

**PS:** Do you want to talk about some of your writing? Do you have some favorites?



**AR:** Oh, yeah.

**PS:** Do you write by sitting down and making an outline of what you're planning to write?

**AR:** I never do. For me writing is writing. I start out and I, I don't work the way so many writers do. I don't, I don't have a plan, I don't have a, a way to move forward except reacting to what I've just written. So it's always an ad— when I said adventure earlier I meant for myself. Uh, writing, I just, uh, find it. And it's hard to explain what that process is. It's a very difficult one to teach, but it's a, it's just associative, one thing leads to another. And it's like a big detective novel. You just kind of keep moving and, and — of course later I come back and, and revise and, and fix things up but when I'm really sitting down to write I don't know what, I don't know what I'm going to write. I don't know what it's going to be. And I've come to trust that through the years. A lot of people get nervous about that or that's what creates — that's the definition of writer's block. But for me it's, uh, it's kind of the opposite. That mean where, where are we going today?.

**PS:** So much of your writing is sort of autobiographical.

**AR:** Yes. I think writers of course, the old adage, write what you know. But I have such a bad memory as a writer than I'm not always, I, I am writing what I know but what I know, I may be the only one who knows it that way so I, I, I feel very comfortable telling stories and then retelling then and telling them again because they're different every time. And for me it's facets of something. Painters do this all the time. They'll paint the same mountaintop over and over and over again and they'll call them studies or they'll whatever. And I, I see myself doing something similar to that. The fact that you've told a story doesn't mean you've exhausted it or that you've told it correctly or that it's the only way it can be told. And so I don't see myself running out material. When I, and, and, of course, it's autobiographical to a certain extent. That doesn't mean it's journalistic. It is the truth but it may not be accurate. And so I'm always moving things around, changing things and, and, uh, making a better piece of writing, better piece of art. Along with remembering something that's worth remembering.

**PS:** I was a little surprised when I went to look for some of your books at the library. The books \_\_\_ \_\_\_ non-fiction not (inaudible)

**AR:** That's where they put poetry, that, that's just where poetry has traditionally been, uh, put and it — people start thinking then that poetry must be a kind of journalism. And it is and it isn't, you know, call it a journalism of the heart, not the eye. That's pretty good.

**PS:** The memoir of Nogales —

**AR:** Yes, now that's —



**PS:** (inaudible) special

**AR:** —that was very special. And it was a way, to be honest, my, my father died in, uh, 1995 and as I've said before so much of my family history seemed to be carried by my parents that I in large measure, uh, while he's in that book I wrote that book for my mother to be able to help her remember what her life had been. And what our life—all of our lives together had added up to. And so there's, there's one part in there where I kind of let her speak and tell some of the story. And, uh, I, I think it, it's a book that helps, helps remember something and, in this case, it's not me as an artist remembering. I'm not making this part up, uh, I am telling it the best way I can tell it. She will, she would have told it differently, but these things are worth remembering. We all have these things in our lives and, and I just feel blessed that as a writer I can do this. And it's a great gift to, to my mother, uh, to my parents.

**PS:** Also tells a little bit about the town itself —

**AR:** Well now that's been the bonus

**PS:** (Inaudible)

**AR:** —in doing that of course it's everybody who lived there and everybody who went through those experiences and walked down those streets and, and has, uh, \_\_\_ \_\_\_ and all of those things. And, and I've been surprised, I shouldn't have been but I was kind of, uh, blinded by why, what I thought I was doing. I, I've been wonderfully surprised that yeah I wasn't doing that by myself and all of these friends — I've been getting all of these wonderful notes and, you know, and I've gone and I've read from the book in Nogales and, and, uh, so many people share so many of those memories that it's become a, a kind of a nice community affair. And, and that part's been a, been very gratifying.

**PS:** (inaudible)

**AR:** Well, yeah, no, it's true —

**PS:** (inaudible)

**AR:** Well, it, here's the — speaking of historians then — actually, uh, the first or second piece in there was a, a modification, uh, Encyclopedia Britannica a couple of years ago had, uh, a group of writers write about their home towns and they, and there included this in the encyclopedia as a way of humanizing the straight forward detail that encyclopedias generally, uh, put into these places. They were recognizing people lived there, people grow up there. And I was lucky enough to be one of the writers they chose and I wrote on Nogales. And one of the early pieces in there is in essence the piece that was in Encyclopedia Britannica. So it is useful to historians, you know, but it is got a humanizing element to it of course.



**PS:** (Inaudible)

**AR:** Well it is. It, and it's ultimately all history. We fool ourselves into thinking otherwise probably, but somebody writes it, you know.

**PS:** You also captured a lot about the \_\_\_ \_\_\_ the program *Birthwrite*.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** (inaudible) about how that program came about?

**AR:** *Birthwrite*, uh, you know, it's about writers who grew up Hispanic a little group of writers. I, I knew them all and, and, uh, had met them back and forth. We all shared some, some stories and, and different things and a filmmaker, uh, decided, you know, he'd heard us and had worked with us in various capacities. Uh, the film writer who was also the filmmaker, uh, thought that this was a, there was some connection here that, that, that, uh, made sense to, to work on.

In my particular case, uh, I had been telling a story for a lot of years that I had written and, and talked about that had to do with growing up, uh, in —After I moved from Rodriguez Street into a little area called Valle Verde which was outside of town about four or five miles, we had an adventure one day as little kids going back up into the hills. And to make a long story short, we reached a hillside beyond which everything was suddenly green like nothing else in Arizona. And in our little hearts, little guys in the middle of the desert, been walking for hours, it meant one thing — and raised the way we were—we had found heaven. And that's what the story is about. Uh, it, it turns out not to have been heaven; turns out somewhat infelicitously to be a golf course. But we discovered it and for, for those few moments, for that half an hour, that, that golden hour we had found what we felt was heaven. And I've never forgotten that feeling, you know. Uh, so, so that, that was a, that was something to tell and to talk about.

And so these — they dramatized it and, and turned it a little, little film and, and, uh, also did some biographical, uh, shooting around town and that sort of stuff. And it was a lot of fun to do, so, it was a good experience. And it became a, a pretty good, uh, documentary for PBS and it's, it's run, it's, it ran for many years, uh, particularly National Hispanic Month, but, uh, but it has run and, and actually has gone into classrooms and I, I when I travel now around the country, uh, so many people have seen that, uh, that it's been a good thing.

**PS:** \_\_\_ the power of television.

**AR:** It is, it's truly amazing, it is. I, I have witnessed that time and time again. I was, I was lucky enough, uh, just a little while back to, to be a finalist for National Book Award and C-C-SPAN covered this. And while people may not have known on one the hand that I'd been this finalist for this big award they — for whatever reason saw it on C-SPAN and I, I got so much more mail because it was on C-SPAN than I had





gotten for the actual event itself. That it was a, it, it helped me see that phenomenon is alive and kicking, so.

**PS:** As a writer those awards must be pretty important, (inaudible) get a lot of publicity —

**AR:** Yeah.

**PS:** —somebody. \_\_\_ \_\_\_ didn't he win — \_\_\_ \_\_\_ I kept hearing about it, so being nominated is almost as good as getting it.

**AR:** Well, it is, it is, that is exactly how it was portrayed to me when I, when I first got the phone call. Uh, the director of the, uh, of, National Book Award, National Book Foundation said, sit down. I said all right. He said, "Now I've got some news for you," he says, "and no matter what happens," he says, "This is going to change your career from now on because what I'm about to tell you is going to be in every Vita you will write whether you win this or not. You're a finalist for the National Book Award." And sure enough this is sort of like, you know, Emmy or Oscar nominee or you know how they — it, it while, while I did not finally win the award as, as one of the several finalist, uh, it, it's an extraordinary achievement regardless. And in fact I now see it in everything written about me so.

**PS:** People remember hearing that you were nominated they might not know who won.

**AR:** Yeah, no, that's right, that's right.

**PS:** (inaudible)

**AR:** That's right.

**PS:** Kind of like who won the Oscar last year.

**AR:** Right, right, right, right.

**PS:** Let's see, as you get older how much of your writing is about your childhood or growing up?

**AR:** I think a, a great deal of my early writing was. And now, uh, I don't know that it's so much about my childhood as about place. I think I write more about place and the people in a place — which sometimes coincides with my childhood — but not necessarily. Uh, so, I, I, I think I've come to terms with the fact that I write a great deal imaginatively and expansively but about a quarter that probably moves from Phoenix down to Guaymas — that's called the old *Pimeria Alta*, uh, area. And that I've just had so many family, so much family in that area and so much experience and, and so much upbringing, so much of what I am is forged by, by that geographic — now geopolitical area — that it's become important to what I do. And I'd say a great deal of my writing now is about that. And it includes my childhood but it, it's not only



relegated to that.

**PS:** Is it changing as get older? \_\_ \_\_ changing?

**AR:** Yes it is and, and it is, uh, moving from probably some sense of naiveté to longing for that naiveté. Uh, it's, it's now knowing things I'm not sure I, I want to know that I don't know are, are valuable to know, but which nevertheless are factors in so much of what goes on. So that's, uh, you know, a little less comforting but needs to be discussed every bit as much as the idealizations of the area.

**PS:** I think you're probably one of the youngest History makers

**AR:** I, I'm sure of it. I, I that happens to me a lot and —

**PS:** I've done some of them in their early sixties I think. (inaudible) but some are in the nineties. It was a pleasure to do one of the youngest.

**AR:** Well, it's been a phenomenon of my life that, that I've enjoyed, uh, but has been surprising every time into groups that I seem to be able to — or I have a knack for somehow having done things earlier, uh, and it's, it's just been, uh, something that's been fun. And I've had that kind of success at the university as well. For example, you know, the youngest this and that. But, uh, it also means I've got a, in a curious way a responsibility then and I enjoy that as well to do something with it, not just, uh, enjoy it. Uh, and there's, that's when, when you're the youngest to something then, uh, you don't get to, to, uh, use it as a credential. It's just, it's a starting point and that's all and, and now what will I do with this? Well I've got time in which to contemplate that and, and, and move.

**PS:** You're often defined as a book writer, a Hispanic writer, (inaudible) Do you define yourself as a book writer?

**AR:** Well, I do among other things. I, I don't, I don't suffer labels very comfortably, uh, I think people label you for whatever they need to do at the moment. I'm all those things and, uh, you know, my mother coming from England certainly adds a whole other dimension to what it is to be Latino then. Uh, or Hispanic or anything else and, and, uh, I, I don't, uh, have any trouble with any of those labels. I don't feel constrained by them however, and, uh, they don't limit what I do or what I think about. But I come where I come from and I, I've experienced what I have experienced and, and those things I, I, I, I think — where, where a label helps to summarize that okay then. That's right, you know what I mean, uh, but that doesn't mean I have to behave in any way or, or, or anything like that. I don't know that it's predictive; it's summative but not necessarily predictive.

**PS:** (inaudible) As a teacher, what do you like best about teaching?

**AR:** Oh, the conversations with bright students. Uh, that give and take — and by bright students I, I



essentially mean all my students. And I, I—the view I take and I think it's a very, very important one—uh, I find something in all my students and I think they've all got something to offer. But classroom is a, is a difficult setting for, for so many people. And it can feel a little bit like a jail room—I mean, you, you, you're, you're there for—you're sentenced to two hours or whatever—you've got to sit there, you're looking at the clock and whatever, so I, I've learned to, to respect those kinds of feelings and to recognize them.

Uh, but what I like most about teaching is that what I, I've come to see now through the years that it is also my writing. That on any given day when I teach that would have been my writing. I give that up to the classroom. So I think I would have been far more prolific had I not been teaching. But it also means it's that important, it's that serious and it's that much of an adventure for me. When I sit, when I go out to teach, I don't know what's going to happen; I don't work from a traditional syllabus, I never have. But I've got enough experience and, and plenty to say and, and plenty of contextualization to offer that no matter which direction the classroom takes I want to go, I want to go there. I'm not, I'm not there to make it go in a particular direction. And I find, uh, that to be the makings of a very exciting classroom. It's dynamic and, and I think a syllabus can be very often pretty deadly when you've got to accomplish what's on that syllabus. We accomplish it as well just in a different way. And I, I think that's a lot of fun.

**PS:** Do you have advice for young people who want to become writers like you?

**AR:** Oh a very basic kind of advice: Every pencil is filled with a book. And as far as I can tell pencils are doing their end of the job, so it's up to us, pick it up, start writing. When you can't sharpen the pencil. That's all it is.

**PS:** Do you use a pencil not a computer?

**AR:** I use everything, you know, I, I use everything and, and I've never been worried. People get, uh, you know, have pens they love and, uh, "I'll never write on a computer," and all that sort of stuff. To me it's never been about the instrument; it's about what happens. So I've never, I've never worried about that. I write everywhere, anyway I can including just trying to remember things.

**PS:** I imagine that students have never used a pencil only used computers.

**AR:** Absolutely true, absolutely true and it shows in their spelling. Of all the things—I do, I do think that the art of writing and I don't just mean penmanship, I mean literally getting language down on a page whether it's a lit up page made of light or made of tree, that that art is changing. I, I, I, I don't have a critical overlay; I don't necessarily think that it's getting worse. It's just definitely changing. What I recognize is that every generation brings something to the table. I can't recognize what this new generation is bringing yet, not exactly but I trust that they are. And I think that's an important thing for teachers just generally to, to be at peace with.



Now that doesn't mean I don't correct misspellings, but I also know that, uh, language changes, uh, all sorts of things change and that I've got to, to try and recognize that.

**PS:** Technology is certainly —

**AR:** —Technology is really changing and you know, there, uh, I, some, I, I — for whatever reason I, I've been invited to different high technology gatherings and conferences and I've, I've worked a lot with computers as well and, and done a lot of website experimentation and stuff — and, uh, have gotten to speak to some world authorities on this sort of thing and it, and it's fun but some devastating sorts of factoids emerge. Uh, one intriguing one is that computers in one form or another — machines — speak, that is to say or communicate more to each other on any given day than the sum total of human beings since the beginning of time. Now you've got to take that with a grain of salt; it probably means every switch that you turn on every light that goes on, every — is a machine communicating. But I appreciate that statement. I mean I think that's a pretty interesting statement. And so that means the most spoken language today is binary language, it's not Mandarin and it's not, you know, English or Spanish. And we, we get all concerned about that, but binary language — ones and zeroes — is the most spoken language. And that's a, that's an interesting, uh, state of affairs for us to find ourselves in.

It's also a very important notion. When I, I'm sitting, for example, this semester a very high tech classroom. State of the art computers at every desk, uh, high, you know, stuff everywhere. A wonderful classroom, but I, I, I'm always reminding my students that it's a place of privilege. We're standing there at a time when half the world has yet to place its first phone call. And then we wonder why there's conflict and why can't we all just get along. Well there are lots of reasons, you know, and they're, they're important reasons. And if you haven't yet even placed a phone call, well, all right we've got some translation problems here. And it's not just language. So.

**PS:** Well do you want to read us a couple of things that you think are —?

**AR:** Sure. Well, I've been, I've been speaking a little bit about how the border worked when I was younger and, and how we've perhaps disconnected ourselves from each other and I speak about the greater, you know, us — all of us together. Uh, recently, uh, I, I, I had some nice experiences with regard to public, poems of public purpose. This is very, it's not something different, I've done this all along but I've been a greater opportunity to do this now, uh, around the Valley and around the state and actually around the country. In which, I've come to see that, that poems — you must, you must sometimes lend your voice to those who do not have one in the same way that a baker lends you the loaf of bread because the baker can make a loaf of bread and you can't. I can write a poem and somebody else can't, that doesn't I'm writing it always for me. Sometimes I've got to lend that ability out and poems of public purpose — all sorts of great things happen as a result of that. It's, it's redefines the book, it means that the book is everywhere, not just between the covers that you encounter what language ought to be, which is to say thought anywhere and that it come to you in surprising ways. One of my favorite, uh, public art projects in recent time is Tempe Town Lake in which, uh, we got a six-mile long six and a half ton, 600-page stone





book. Uh, I got these little poems, 600 of them, surrounding Tempe Town Lake and that was an experience to, to write something so big that any given moment each of them has to be only a few words. Uh, a few from that, uh, that have, that have just been a lot of fun to, to, to hear people react to. Uh, and there are, there are so many that it's hard to say what — how do you define that project — but it's all about water and it's all about the desert and groups like Salt River Project have, have adopted it in curious ways to help represent their story of water in the Valley. And I mentioned early about moisture and my last name Rios and my mother Fogg, uh; water's been a very important thing. Uh, so some of the small poems that come out of that — the one that little kids like the best goes like this: this is a, this is in a form called a *gregería*, which is very short poem. Some humor and some seriousness connecting together in order to create a finger snap or an epiphany moment. Here's one.

*Nobody owns water, drink some and try to keep it.*

When they figure that out they love that. Uh, my, my particular favorite, uh, uh, is a little bit more esoteric but, but I like it and it goes like this:

*Water is gravity's dog following it everywhere.*

About the behavior, the physical behavior \_\_\_ of just something like that. These are little truisms, little, uh, they're called little gnomes, which are little moments of knowing, uh, just about water. Uh, one more maybe would be something like:

*To visit the river quickly, cut an onion.*

And we get it. As human beings we understand that moment of connection. So those are a lot of fun to write, a lot of fun to think about and a curious way to start describing the, the what water is like in, in Phoenix particularly and Arizona generally. I grew up after all next to the Santa Cruz River, which has no water in sight so water was always a magical thing.

**PS:** Until it rains.

**AR:** Until it rains. There's also the, the little tragedy of — and it's happened in previous years but this year it's been pronounced — of the, uh, pelicans coming over from California being lost and it being so hot here that the shimmering in the highway they interpret it as water — as we do, we call it the mirage of water — but then they dive into it. And, uh, with tragic consequences.

Well that idea of diving into and, and tragic consequences is what the border too often has become. Uh, we're diving into it and crashing instead of finding ways to, to speak to each other. And I, I was recently asked by the Governor, by Janet Napolitano to write her inauguration poem, which I was very pleased to do and she called on me after that to also write a poem for the visit of President Vicente Fox of Mexico. And this was a, a wonderful opportunity to, to embrace and, and to expound on this notion of connection



as much as separation and distinction. So this is the poem, it's called "Borderlines" and it comes with a little epigraph that I also wrote:

*A weight carried by two weighs only half as much  
The world on a map looks like a drawing of a cow in a butcher shop  
All those lines showing where to cut  
That drawing of a cow is also a jigsaw puzzle  
Showing just as much how very well all the strange parts fit together.*

*Which way we look at the drawing makes all the difference  
We seem to live in a world of maps  
But in truth we live in a world made not of paper and ink  
But of people. Those lines are our lives.*

*Together let us turn the map until we see clearly the border is what joins us not what separates us.*

That was, that was a nice poem to be able to read on the occasion of that visit.

**PS:** And there's so much controversy over the border, do you get involved in that?

**AR:** Well I do, I do. But those are the kinds of things I say and, and but I like, I, I, I don't traffic in, in histrionics or reactionism. My way of talking about things is the same way that I teach. It's by story, by anecdote, by the real lives of people who've really done this, not, not by catch phrases or, or absolutes or anything like this. Every story, you see everybody has a different experience; everybody goes through it a little differently and, and it's worth paying attention to that. So, uh, uh, I do get drawn into this quite a bit. Uh, but I tell stories and it think that's the way to, to make it come alive instead of to deaden into sort of word play, which is what it becomes rather than us taking it seriously.

**PS:** Lately we're hearing so much about \_\_\_ (inaudible)

**AR:** Well, (both speaking at once) you know all, already it's a, it's a war zone and the, the metal that they're using for the wall were runways in Viet Nam — they're, they're portable runways that they — instead of being flat, they've turned them up on their side. But what's — and so they've created a sort of scar if you've, if you've seen border lately. And of course the fact that they were, they come out of a war zone is, is highly metaphorical. Nobody talks about it quite that way, but, you know what else can we do. Build moats and then, and then what? Let's get some big scissors and then — it's not solving the problem. It's of course something else. It's doing something else and it's, it's not helping. So there've got to be other solutions and, and ultimately we'll regret not having looked harder for them if we don't \_\_\_ that soon.

**PS:** (inaudible)



**AR:** Sure. Yeah, I, while, while we might have some issues like that I also come from a, a large extended family. I, I said when my father ran away from home, he really couldn't, they had family everywhere and, and, uh, I've been regaled all my life with family stories from my great aunts and my grandmother and my, uh, my aunts and uncles and my parents. And there was, uh, one man in, in my family who I, I had seen a little picture of him when I was little — I've always remembered him and I've actually written about him because I remember visiting him when I was young. He lived, he, he took care of the family ranch. If you, uh, have family in Mexico, Mexico is such an agrarian, uh, country that somewhere along in your family you lived on a ranch, uh, or a farm of some sort. So the family, uh, *ranchito*, as they say a little ranch, uh, we had a ranch in the, uh, Sonora area, just, uh, outside of Hermosillo, north of that.

And, uh, I had an Uncle Carlos who, who took care of that ranch for the family and I remembered visiting him when I was maybe 10 or 11 and there were food orchards. And we visited him right in fruiting season and I'll never forget we, we pulled up and he lived in what I know now was kind of a hovel. It was a, a mud shack with no windows, which as little kids we thought was the coolest thing in the world. "And you can get into your house through the windows. That's great." Of course it was poverty but through the eyes of a kid this is like as great as it gets. And I remember him coming out and him sort of looking at all of these fruit trees with fruit on every last one of them, he said, "You boys, you go get whatever you want and all you, and all you want." And we did and it was like Eden; it was just this perfect place.

Well, that was my notions of it and notions of him — this wonderful man. Many years later when I was in college, I was visiting home and my father got a phone call, he blanched. And I knew, I knew there was something was up but he didn't say anything afterward. And about an hour later he said, "you know, you probably don't remember him but my Uncle Carlos died." And I had this rush of feeling hearing my father say you probably don't remember him. When I remembered him vividly. But I also recognized I'd probably had never talked about that. And my father had no way of knowing. And I was telling that story to my Aunt Norma and the moment I said Uncle Carlos she jumped up and she said, "Oh, he was the meanest man who ever lived." And that was relatively recently and this was a whole new take and I heard this whole other story that I turned into this poem. And it's about how mean he was and I had no, no idea. This is called "Refugio's Hair." Refugio was my great — was my grandmother's name and my great grandmother's name, just out of curiosity. "Refugio's Hair."

*In the old days of our family, my grandmother was a young woman whose hair was as long as the river.  
She lived with her sisters on the ranch, La Calera, the land of the lion and her days were happy.  
But her Uncle Carlos lived there too. Carlos whose soul had the edge of a knife  
One day to teach her to ride a horse, he made her climb onto the fastest one bareback and sit there as he  
held it's long face in his arms  
And then he did the unspeakable deed for which he would always be remembered  
He called for the handsome boy, Tirrín, the baby and he placed that child in her arms  
With that picture of a Madonna on horseback, he slapped the shank of the horse's rear leg  
The horse did what a horse must, racing full toward the bright horizon  
But first it ran under the Alamo trees to rid its back of this unfair weight, this woman full of tears and this*



*baby full of love*

*When they reach the trees and went under, my grandmother's hair, which had trailed her equal in its magnificence to the tail of the horse,*

*That hair rose up and flew into the branches as if it were a thousand arms all of them trying to save her*

*The horse ran off and left her, the baby still in her arms, the two of them hanging from her hair.*

*The baby looked only at her and did not cry so steady was her cradle.*

*Her sisters came running to save them, but the hair would not let go*

*From its fear it held on and had to be cut. All of it from her head.*

*From that day on my grandmother wore her hair short, like a scream, but it was long like a river in her sleep.*

**PS:** That's great!

**AR:** Oh, thanks. That was a startling story for me to hear after all of those years of thinking that this man was a saint. And then suddenly these terrible things that he did, you know, emerged that — again it's that turning things around, you know, that, that, uh, that has value. And if I hadn't stayed with that story I would never had come to that.

**PS:** Do you want to read another for us?

**AR:** Yeah, I can, I can read another. Sure, I there's one poem I think I'd like to read just, we've seen so much of this lately and I've been talking about my brother working for the forest service. And we've talked about this a little bit ourselves and it's a hard one. This is about the place in which we live and we think of ourselves as being the inhabitants — ourselves being human beings. But we share this world with so many beings that we confuse our place in it, and perhaps give ourselves more importance sometimes than we ought. And this is just about the last, this is, uh, several years ago when we were just having so many fires, since my brother works for the forest service, this is what this came out of. This is called "Rabbits in Fire."

*Everything's been said but one last thing about the desert and it's awful*

*During brushfires in the Sonoran desert brushfires that happen before the monsoon*

*And in the great deep wide and smothering heat of the hottest months, the longest months the hypnotic immeasurable lulls of August and July*

*During these summer fires, jackrabbits, jackrabbits and everything that lives in the brush of the rolling hills,*

*But jackrabbits especially. Jackrabbits can get caught in the flames.*

*No matter how fast and big and strong and sleek they are.*

*And when they're caught, cornered in and against the thick trunks and thin spines of the cactus.*

*When they can't back up anymore and they can't move the flame it touches them and their fur catches fire*

*Of course they run away from the flame finding movement even when there is none to be found jumping big and high over the wave of fire*





*Or backing even harder through the impenetrable tangle of hardened Saguaro and prickly pear and cholla and barrel,  
But whichever way they find what happens is what happens.  
They catch fire and then they bring the fire with them when they run  
They don't know they're on fire at first running so fast as to make the fire shoot like rocket engines and smoke behind them  
But then the rabbits tire and the fire catches up, stuck onto them like the needles of the cactus which at first must be what they think they feel on their skins  
They've felt this before, every rabbit, but this time the feeling keeps on  
And of course they ignite the brush and dried weeds all over again making more fire all around them  
I'm sorry for the rabbits and I'm sorry for us to know this*

**AR:** Was that the dog ?

**PS:** Now is that something your brother described to you?

**AR:** I had, I had, I had various references to it. My wife had seen permutations of that and then we had talked about — he described it. And I read this at a, at a Regents, at a Regents, uh, meaning the Arizona Board of Regents — I was reading some things for them — and one of the Regents came up afterwards and just was pale, and he said, “That happened to me,” he said. “I was a young man, I was, I was doing surveying, we were in a forest fire, it was a little bit in the distance, uh, but it was coming closer and closer. So we were enlisted to help fight, fight the fire. I was sitting down,” he said, “and out of the fire a rabbit came running to me — at me,” he said, “which never happens. It came running right up, looked at me, was on fire and it died,” he said. And he has never forgotten that and when he, when he heard that, it was just like this, you know... a special moment had been given to him and, and the rabbit couldn't do anything, he couldn't do anything and there they were.

**PS:** And what is the metal letter — There's two of those \_\_

**AR:** Yes. You know I talk a lot about the alphabet and I've been talking a lot about language but words make up language and, and letters make up words and, and we know how to use all of these things but we don't always know what they are. We're — to use the Latin phrase — *in medius res*. We're in the middle of as current contemporary society. We're in the middle of all sorts of things. I know how to drive my car, but I don't know how to make it. I don't even know how to make a tire. I just know how to use it. And I, the more I thought about that it makes me think about language. I know how to use it; I know how to use letters to make up words and so on. But I don't know that I was ever taught what it was or what even letters of the alphabet were. Just that “A” came at the beginning, “B,” “C,” and so on. But they mean something and “A” is the beginning of most alphabets in use today for a reason. It's a picture, originally of an ox, they're ox horns and it — uh, you just turn that “A” around and you've got the, the hieroglyph for “ox”, you've got the, the thing like that — put two “Is” in the middle and you've got an ox. And it's at the beginning because it suggests the first thing — food. And the letter “B” was written on its side and it's a



depiction of a traditional Middle Eastern dwelling, it's a house. Food and shelter alphabet. It meant something and you lived or died by that.

Well okay we don't know that so well, you know, we don't, we don't even learn it very, very often and what it occurred — what it has occurred to me through the years of course is that well if that's an ancient Middle Eastern dwelling how is it my house? It's the idea of a house, the letter "B" but is it mine? And are there other letters?

And in just looking through my childhood and through my house I started thinking about what my letters might be; what my alphabet might be? And I remember as a kid, uh, I was about —we, living outside town and I said produce along with tourism was one of the main, uh, industries of Nogales. That included all sorts of things, including the most wonderful produce of all, watermelons. And I lived across the street — we were outside of town about five miles but there were some produce companies on the other side of, of the arroyo, where we weren't supposed to go, but of course always went. And every summer it was quite wonderful cause they were shipping all sorts of produce coming up from Mexico and moving. That if you were an enterprising young person, you could perhaps borrow a little of that produce watermelons in particular. You find out as a young boy that your shoulders are like two perfect watermelon carriers and if you just were in the right place at the right time, you can go running down with your great prize of two watermelons and take them to the secret clearing where you could do the most wonderful thing imaginable to a kid at that age and in that time — crack the watermelons open and eat just the heart.

And the only urban equivalent I can think of — I remember walking through Kreskes, you know the five-and-dime store — and the first thing you'd be hit by is the smell of the popcorn but right next to that were all the nuts and I remember thinking, 'oh, if there just weren't glass in front of them.' And it was a little bit like that feeling getting to just stick your face into all the cashews you know.

Well one day, we were, we were in railroad cars looking for watermelons and I had some friends and we were doing this when we heard this huge explosion, well what sounded like an explosion and sure enough, uh, a semi truck exploded and, uh, we all came out running to see all the workmen stopped, we jumped out of the, we jumped out of the, uh, train car that we were in. And it turns out half our neighborhood was there so there were— all sorts of kids were, were borrowing — we were all so good, we didn't see each other — and we all watched in awe as this truck burned. And I don't know what was in it to this day. I don't know what would have caused it; and I don't think I want to know.

It burned and I watched it and what was amazing to me was semi trucks were the biggest thing in our lives back then. They were big. And I saw it melt. I saw it just transfigure. I hadn't seen any Dali paintings yet but it was if it were doing that. It would just melt from the heat of the fire. And the metal started to drip into puddles and I remember watching how that semi truck could become something else. And we watched it and we were amazed and we, we left.

And the next morning I came back and it was still there but it was all basically in a puddle on the ground.



And I kicked up one of the pieces, took it home with me and a couple of years ago I found it again. And when I saw it I knew what it was: first letter of my alphabet. Right, okay. That's how things ought to work, we ought to know what they are and have some stake in it. Go grab a dog before he —

**PS:** he's not very happy.

