INTRODUCTION

by John Rechy

There exists a pervasive myth, contrary to ample and increasing evidence, that hardly any "*really*" serious" art emerges out of Southern California. This myth of creative aridity persists despite the intimate courtship of countless major artists who have been fascinated by the vicissitudes of this enigmatic city, painting it, writing about it, living here off-and-on or permanently.

"Eastern writers" are guaranteed the imprimatur of sophistication and relevance; "Southern writers" evoke an honored gothic tradition. Even often-maligned "Western writers" are granted an extended heritage of adventurousness. But pronounce the phrase "Southern California artist," and suspicions dredge up a confused association; a glitzy meretricious, ephemeral image of Hollywood looms, headquarters of dubious creativity, whether that assessment is deserved or not.

Southern California is not only Hollywood. A city so vast it cannot be characterized like others, Los Angeles stretches from the sculpted cliffs of Malibu over the Pacific Ocean to East Los Angeles with its bold murals of Aztec princes, and on into the desert, where Joshua trees hold bunches of flowers like white-flamed torches.

The City of Our Lady of the Angels is a grand and appropriate name for the most spiritual of American cities, one which is also—and this is not contradiction—the most physical; a profound city whose expanse and diversity contain the various bright and dark energies of the country, all gathered here in admitted exaggeration, as exaggerated as actors in Greek drama. That often results in misinterpretation: its natural beauty arbitrarily tainted by artificial Technicolor, the extravagant grandeur of its unique and often-urgent lives labeled "excess," its acute self-awareness judged "hedonistic."

It is a visually inspiring city which can reconcile seeming opposites into a harmony of surprising juxtapositions. The complexity of its heritage allows it to contain treasures that range from paintings that would honor any museum in the world to that masterpiece of folk art and perseverence, the wondrous Watts Towers, art like no other. Its breadth can accommodate without disharmony the grand arcs of Spanish courtyards and the steeples of Victorian mansions; the vagaries of Art Deco flow easily into the slim elegance of Art Nouveau. New and old, the disparate areas of the city are connected by a giant majestic modern sculpture of steel and cement, the network of its sweeping freeways.

America ends here, at the shoreline of the Pacific. As the boundaries of the country pushed away from the crowded East to the California of gold and possibilities, vibrant energies coalesced, creating the last, and youngest, frontier; that fact has steadily prepared a range of creative voices that today matches that of any other city. But beyond their own territory, most of those voices are mistreated, unacknowledged, ignored—because they defy facile identification. Often challenging traditional assumptions, they are *individual* voices, not categorizable choruses.

A burgeoning of poetry and prose readings brave enough to explore "punk"; new art galleries in furbished sections blocks from Skid Row; an international theater and arts festival that included opera and ballet as well as radical experimenters, the growth of prestigious publishing houses, the influx of students from all over the country to creative arts programs—all these provide strong rebuttal, among many others, to the entrenched cliches of Southern California's "artistic aridity."

The publication of this anthology, which will become a yearly national literary review, is further exciting evidence. The voices that are "heard" here assert many elements of that unique creativity. There are black voices, white voices, Chicano voices, Oriental voices, of men and women, traditional and experimental voices, internationally famous voices, voices already highly honored—with Fulbrights, Guggenheims, other national distinctions; and there are, importantly, voices heard here for the first time but to be heard from again.

The youngest contributor is in his teens, the oldest is nearing 70. Although most are located in Southern California now, they come from everywhere; they write about Los Angeles, small Eastern towns, exotic foreign cities—the world. They are united in a collection complied and published in Southern California for national exposure. In varying pitches, these voices add distinctively to the many manifestations that Southern California, once the new frontier of the land, may become the new frontier of its creativity—appropriately centered in the profound City of the Angels.

Los Angeles, 1984

John Rechy

From: Autobiography: A Novel

My beautiful mother fled the City of Chihuahua during the revolution when word reached her family that Poncho Villa was sending one of his lieutenants to kidnap her after having seen her at a ball which he had invaded, and my Scottish father fled his wealthy home in Mexico City as his mother fired a gun at his heels to emphasize her act of banishment. Or so I was to learn from accounts of my family history as I inherited ghosts that roamed the memories of others and floated into mine.

My mother bore the grand name of Guadalupe Flores de Rechy, and my father bore the equally grand name of Roberto Sixto Rechy. The "Sixto," or sixth, was attributable not to any sequence of birth—he was an only child—but to a remote lord, the sixth, exhumed in versions of his aristocratic lineage, originating in Scotland but transferring to Mexico City, where his father, a respected doctor, was a frequent guest, with his family, of President Porfirio Diaz, the Mexican dictator with European loyalties.

While the revolution raged across the Rio Grande and having simultaneously fled their respective threats miles apart, both my father and mother—still unknown to each other—crossed the border into El Paso, Texas, at exactly the same time. In the new city my mother's youngest brother, playing, thrust a ball through the window of my father's house. Chasing the young destroyer, my father encountered my mother—and married her.

In the deep of the Depression, when Texas was swept by poverty, and winds gathered to devastate the crops of nearby Oklahoma into dust, I was born into a sea of clashing memories, the youngest of five children, two brothers, two sisters.

Now of course my father and mother did not flee at the exact time. Of course they did not cross the border at the same moment. Autobi-

ography creates its own time in rearranged memories. It orders random accidents into inevitability. I am able to reconstruct my life from birth, even before birth through inherited memories, and so to provide structure to what is shapeless, reason to anarchy—and the only meaning possible, a retrospective meaning, imposed; the only truth, one's own. That is, autobiography as novel.

Oh, my mother was a conquering beauty, her dance card instantly filled during the balls she reigned over in Chihuahua. Her aunt, my great-aunt, *Tia* Ana (who practiced white magic and converted, through efficacious prayers and holy incantations, my first novel—I believe this—into a top bestseller) loaned me her recollections of my mother as a girl, of her beautiful green eyes, flawless fair skin and hair. My mother denied it all, but in tones which asserted happily, "Yes, it's all true, tell him more." And *Tia* Ana did, gave me such careful memories that in them, I become my mother's chosen escort!—she draws a line cancelling out all dances with others. And, years later, she did teach me to waltz! Her skin remained flawless, her hair bright, her eyes truly green—until death attempted to close them; they remain in my mind clear-green.

Death exists only for the living. It is a presence, not an absence, a new presence born at the moment of death. People gone, places left behind, continue to grow and change, are resurrected, rediscovered. And die daily.

My father willed me deep memories, too. His were of fortune and fame, then withering fortune, withering fame, finally assaulting loss. There was a tenuous reconciliation between him and his mother. She left me two paintings: One was of their family home in Mexico City, the horse-drawn carriage before it emphasizing their former station in life; for me, years later, that carriage looked like a surrendered relic. The other was a portrait of herself, painted on glass: a handsome haughty woman with stark-black hair and a white lace-ruffled blouse rising to her chin, deliberately isolating the face of the powerful woman who had banished my father with gunshots. Why?

My life as novel allows me to supply motives that satisfy me, adhering to autobiography by basing them on subsequent evidence, always allowing for mystery. Reordered memory at times discovers only the shape of mystery.

At dinnertime while oppressed servants silently attended, my father announced, "I oppose the tyranny of the Dictator Diaz!"

"I forbid you to continue," says my grandmother.

My grandfather does not take sides, but quietly champions my fa-

ther—as do the servants. My father goes on to assert sympathy for agrarian reforms. "And the revolutionaries!" exclaims one of the maids. (She was a pretty Indian woman, and she had introduced my father to sex and the ways of social justice.)

"Yes, and them!" my father asserts. My grandmother grabs her jeweled gun. Yes! That is exactly how it happened; now it is lodged in my memory. I remember it! Reordered time, inherited memories, and imagination allow me to applaud my father's act while my grandmother glares at me, too, and my mother smiles approval—all within adjusted time. The Indian maid's name was—. . .

Maria.

I have based that reconstruction on what happened subsequently: My father was run out of a small Southwest town for opposing municipal corruption by exposing it in a "radical" newspaper he printed by himself. A daring pioneer against injustices, especially in bigoted giant Texas, he was defiant, courageous—and cruel, with the cruelty he inherited from the woman in the glass portrait.

Autobiography changes from moment to moment. It is not what happened but what is remembered. Its only sequence is that of memory. Alter the order of events and you change meaning.

In my memories I discover this: My father's eyes were always filled with tears!—perhaps unseen tears.

Before that new discovery, I knew only this: He was my father and he hated me. Now I remember real and invisible tears, I find a new man bearing the same life. Early he became a notable figure in the world of music. He had been a child prodigy, learning to play "every instrument." The music faded. Aging memories were replaced by those of decline. He is no longer the conductor of his own celebrated orchestra, composer of musical scores, no longer the director of his own touring theater, no longer writes music for the films that occupied him briefly, no longer even tutors untalented Texas children. Now he spends dark hours re-orchestrating music no one wants, music filed in an old wooden cabinet, eventually lost. Soon he will no longer be even the caretaker of a public park. Now he is an old gray man, mocked by ghosts. He gets up at dawn to clean the night's debris at a hospital, fragments of accidents and death. When he returns home, he lashes out with threats of fire and violence. Then he screams for recognition: "I am respected, known!" My mother soothes him, agreeing. When he died, telegrams came from important figures all over the country and Mexico, who had ignored his slow dying.

Remembered—or inserted—unseen tears reveal this now. He

hated only the reflection of himself in me.

Truth changes new memories. We do not move into the past, we bring it forward with new life. My mother and father speak words I heard long ago (or heard about) but hear now anew, spoken only to me, spoken through me. Tomorrow, if I find my father's anger in me, I may forget his tears, insist that I inserted them, revise today's truth.

Before that happens, I will remember this, which will now color all subsequent recollections: After the rampages of anger, my father would bring me presents. He lavished armsful of fresh flowers on my mother, the flowers splashed the drab house of poverty with astonishing colors. He loved her! Shall I allow myself to believe that she loved him, too?

On her Saint's Day, December 12—the day of Our Lady of Guadalupe—he would serenade her at the tint of dawn, turning up with dashing *mariachis* to sing *Las Mananitas* outside her window. She, pretending surprise but having gone to bed carefully arranged for her appearance at the window, would then invite everyone grandly to an already prepared breakfast of coffee, chocolate, *pan de dulce.* She reigned with her smile. He continued the yearly serenades even when he was old, turning up at her window with a band of increasingly ragged musicians.

Slides flash on the scrim of memory, at times unwind images like strips of film. Autobiography contains photographs, faded or sharp. And silhouettes—shadows that exist only when exact light is at the exact angle. Only the past changes.

But for me this is constant: On the steps of a bandaged Texas house that has a tattered screen porch, four-years-old I lie on my mother's lap. The Texas sky multiplies a million stars. I begin to doze as my mother curls with her saliva-moistened finger my eyelashes, which were long and thick.

We had moved from a pretty house we could no longer afford. Poverty invaded our lives. Over fire made from wood and propped on bricks, my mother heats tin tubs of water to wash our clothes. I remember white sheets. They hang on a line. Memory washes them again. My mother empties the tub, water carves mysterious shapes on the dry soil. I see her against the blue sky under a white sun.

I will splice this memory!—a film-clip unwinding on the screen of my mind. I'll keep the memory in slow motion. After my first novel was published, I bought my mother a house; and soon after, we drove to Los Angeles to visit my sister. Halfway there, so she will not grow tired, I rent for overnight a suite in the gaudiest and most expensive motel in Phoenix, Arizona. We collect stares as we enter the

pretentious lobby, because I am wearing torn jeans, no shirt; my mother wears a lovely summer hat, white gloves. I ask for the best accommodations.

Close up. Tight focus. The motel pool sprawls across a green lawn under pastel-haloed palmtrees, the water is colored silver in the desert night. My mother has taken her sleeping pill. She wears a summer robe, so light it sighs in a breezeless night. We sit by the pool. She tells me she would like a cool soft drink. I order it, and it comes on a platter. She sips it. She smiles her magical smile. "Thank you, my son. Now I'll have a restful sleep. Goodnight, my son." I see her small form moving in and out of tinted shadows.

I want that mysterious moment to stay, to halt. □