

# LAWRENCE R. SMITH



# FLASH MEMOIR

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New Year's Eve, 1944, near the end of World War II. During one of the worst snowstorms in the history of Rochester, New York (and that's saying a lot) they took my mother to the hospital in an open Army jeep. It was the only vehicle that could make it through the snow. 24 hours of labor later, at 10:33 PM, she gave birth to Rochester's last New Year's baby. No prizes, no picture in the newspaper, and my tardiness cost my father a tax deduction. It was a bad start.



My mother was tough: a dead-eye shot, she nailed jackrabbits while draped over the front fender of a car speeding through adjacent fields. Her mother, as a young woman in St. Joseph, Missouri, watched her doctor uncle declare Jesse James dead after he'd been shot in the back. St. Joe was the Wild West in

those days. My mom's father owned a gambling establishment in that notorious town, but died young and left the family impoverished. The gambler's daughter supported her family as a seamstress, and was skilled enough to be driven by limo to Kansas City to sew and fit a fancy dress for Duke Ellington's favorite girl. In the middle of the Great Depression she went to art school in Rochester, became a talented portrait artist, but ended up dressing shop windows and eating mustard sandwiches for lunch. Later she got a job at Kodak and survived.

My father was a chemical engineer who left Toronto to work in Eastman Kodak's research labs. During World War II he helped develop a color film for aerial reconnaissance that charted the underwater topography around the Pacific islands we were about to invade. That helped his brother-in-law, my Uncle Gene, a Navy signalman who was on the first wave at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. After the war, when I was just a toddler, Uncle Gene would give me wild rides in his souped-up 1940 Ford Coupe. He'd take me to joints where he'd fire up the juke box with rhythm and blues and I'd dance, attracting crowds. When my father found out, the practice was forbidden. But I digress. For many years Kodak required that people send their color film to Rochester for developing and printing. After World War II, Kodak lost an anti-trust suit against this practice and was given three years to disseminate the complex color technology to photofinishers throughout the country. That was the beginning of my gypsy life.

We left Rochester for Decatur, Georgia (then a suburb of Atlanta), where I learned to be wary of Southern charm, and that "Bless your little heart!" was a substitute for choice four letter words. Next we moved to Richfield, Minnesota, a

suburb of Minneapolis. In the winter my mother defrosted our fingers and toes in a bathtub of cold water, but it stung as if it were boiling hot. After that, I always marveled at the ability of Plains Indians to survive those ferocious winters. A quick stop in Chicago followed, and then back to a suburb of Rochester—Pittsford, New York. Because of a quirk in school district lines, I went to East Rochester schools. It was a small town, largely Italian-American, where everyone worked either in the New York Central Railroad car shops or the Steinway piano works. It was the first place I heard spoken Italian. I had a number of serious crushes on Italian-American girls; their stunning beauty is vivid in my memory to this day.

In 7<sup>th</sup> grade I read *Johnny Tremain* and was fascinated by the book's ability to transfer me to another time and place. Living a relatively solitary life, this was appealing. When I discovered Clifton Fadiman's 100 Greatest Books list in the Sunday paper's *Parade Magazine*, I was determined to educate myself by reading all of them, even though some of the "books" were "The Complete Works of..." I went to the library and took out *David Copperfield*. The totality of its world was so attractive, I lived there for weeks. Finishing the last page left me in desperate loneliness. Then I tried *Robinson Crusoe*, several Shakespeare plays, and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. After returning *Magic Mountain*, the librarian said, "Did you really read this?" Maybe my sense of historical context was lacking, but I understood the symbolism and I knew what Mann was saying. My critical comments convinced the librarian, who smiled and shook her head.

I don't remember why I became a paperboy at 12, but I quickly built a modest route into a huge one, later split with my brother. A bale of newspapers came every afternoon. Before

folding them for delivery I checked the latest on the revolutions in Algeria and Cuba. As a kid revolutionary, I rooted for the rebels in both cases. Even during that McCarthyite era, the Cuban dictator Batista was such a horrible character the authorities looked the other way as guns and supplies were run to the rebels from the U. S. And who were the French to try to keep their grip on a country that belonged to someone else? After browsing the revolution news, I looked at the stock page. It was important because I had enough money from the paper route to invest. 3M impressed me: they had a solid main product and were expanding through research into all kinds of things. But my father made me go into Kodak stock. There was a broker on my route who often chatted with me. She took my advice on 3M and made a lot of money.

My father was transferred to New York City in 1960. He bought a house in Chappaqua (the town the Clintons adopted 40 years later). There I met a group of kids who summered in Europe, took weekend ski trips to Stowe, and spent spring break in Bermuda rather than Daytona Beach. This all amazed me, but I didn't find that life particularly attractive. However, Horace Greeley High School was outstanding, with highly qualified teachers. They had language labs before most colleges did, and my French teacher spoke native French. This nomadic childhood influenced me greatly, as did my wife's experience as an Army brat following her officer father to bases all over the country and to Taiwan. It's a permanent cure for insular thinking.

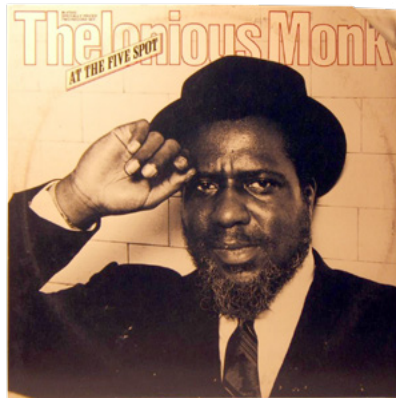
A 1957 silver and cream hardtop convertible Pontiac Star Chief was the family car. It had a matching leather interior and a huge V-8 engine. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I loved to drive that car. Too much. Bragging about its power inevitably led to drag races, which I always won,

but which also eventually killed the transmission. And there were other ways to get into trouble. I visited a friend who had built a cabin on the New York side of the Berkshires. Since my friend was a Thoreau enthusiast, we planned to spend a couple of days in solitude. But after a few hours we got bored. Somehow the solution was to take a joy ride in his baby blue '55 Buick Roadmaster convertible, drive to Nova Scotia to see the legendary Bay of Fundy tide come in. We went all night, one of us driving and the other sleeping in the back seat, then changing places. Arriving in Advocate's Harbor the next afternoon, we were disappointed. There were vast tidal flats, but they seemed far from exciting. We walked a long way out on them, until we noticed the water rising quickly over our ankles. Running as fast as we could for the shore, slogging the last stretch through rushing water, we made it, but barely. Since no one knew where we were but us, it would have taken a long while for our families to determine our fate if we had been washed away.

Then there was Tony's Bar in Pleasantville, NY, a few miles from Chappaqua. That was where we went to drink underage. Since the legal age was 18 in New York, that meant 16 or 17. One night, strolling out of Tony's pretty well lit, a couple of lurking cops nabbed me. They threw me in the back seat of the squad car, took me to the station, then shifted into a classic bad cop/good cop routine to get me to write a confession. I was so far gone that when I tried to write what Good Cop dictated the result wasn't legible, and he was blowing his role by getting angry. After being left alone for quite a while, Bad Cop came in with Tony and said, "This kid was drinking in your place." Tony glowered at me and said, "You weren't there, were you?" So offended by all the night's bullying, I said "Yes, I was." Alone again. A few minutes later, Bad Cop came back

and said, “You weren’t in Tony’s tonight, were you?” I said, “I wasn’t?” “No. Tony is a nice guy, a family man. We don’t want to make trouble for him.” Off I went, the unwilling accomplice in a shake-down.

I wanted to follow my Uncle Bill (one of Oppenheimer’s boys) by pursuing a career in physics. In the early 60s it was considered patriotic to go into science and engineering to beat the Russians at the missile/space race. Eugene Horowitz (my high school English teacher, novelist and nephew of Vladimir) begged my parents to stop me from going to UC Berkeley to become a physicist. That was unnecessary. Physics bored me so completely I switched to English in my second year. Sadly, Eugene died just before my first novel was published. He would have been pleased that I ended up following his suggested path.



My friends and I liked to cruise Greenwich Village in the early 60s, watching “beatniks” from the Bronx getting off the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue bus, wearing sandals and paste-on beards. They, like the rest of us, were looking for girls who were looking for hipsters. But the jazz clubs were our main draw. We couldn’t



afford the cover charge at the Vanguard or Gate, so we ended up at the Five Spot in St. Mark's place. No cover charge. You could buy a beer or two and groove on Thelonious Monk or Charles Mingus (my two jazz heroes) all night. I sat at the end of the bar when Thelonious Monk played, about ten feet away from him. His back to me, I observed the marvel of his hands on the keyboard. Sometimes when Monk played, Mingus was in the audience. Once I watched him give a lesson to Monk's young bassist. Standing right next to them, I couldn't believe how lucky I was to be allowed that privilege. Still can't.

In the summer of 1963 I worked a construction job at the World's Fair site in Flushing Meadows. I spent most of my time hauling huge scaffolding planks in withering heat, but it paid well. I earned \$4.44 an hour, an astonishing amount to me at the time. My last day on the job the guys I worked with "took me to lunch," meaning to a bar with a lot of shots lined up. I figured what the hell. When I got back to the site, the foreman asked, in disbelief, "Are you drunk, Smitty?" Since it was true, I said "Yep." Two years later I worked in the World's Fair as a salesman at Medo Camera Shop.



That was the summer the Beatles appeared at Shea stadium. Walking to the IRT, I was stunned by the din coming from the stadium and its galaxy of flash cube bursts. But the most amazing thing that summer was my friendship with two Haitian guys who were salesmen at the same shop. Tony was small, slight, and ordinary-looking. His friend was tall, handsome, and looked like a star athlete. Gorgeous girls, of all different ethnicities, would come to see Tony at the shop, begging him to go out with them again. He'd always send them away. We all wondered what his magic was, and if he would teach it to us. The handsome guy was getting married one weekend, and I was invited to the bachelor party in Morningside. When I arrived, there were a lot of girls around—not the expected stripper or two. Soon a fight over a girl broke out between the groom-to-be and another guy. He had become a raging maniac and pushed someone through a plate glass window. I was trying to make a quick retreat when I saw little Tony in the hallway, leading his huge friend by the hand, the latter looking like a zombie. I said, “What did you do, Tony?” He said, “I burned him.” That was it—out the door and quickly down the street as three squad cars arrived.



*Berkeley, Mario Savio, 1964*

Berkeley, October 1, 1964. Looking out my apartment window, I saw people running toward the campus. They said something was happening in Sproul Plaza, so I joined them. When we arrived, there was a white unmarked campus police car surrounded by a lot of students. Several people were standing on the car's smashed down roof, including a tall skinny guy who turned out to be Mario Savio. I stood next to the car, looking up at him as he tried to persuade fraternity boys (who stood at the top of the Sproul Hall steps) to join the protest. They answered by calling him all kinds of unsavory things. But he continued on. The day before Jack Weinberg was collecting change in a coffee can to support the Freedom Riders who were bussing to the South to register Black voters. He always sat at a card table on the apron abutting Bancroft Avenue. It was not campus property. After pressure from some people in Berkeley who thought the civil rights movement was a Communist plot, the University sent campus police to tell Weinberg he couldn't collect money there anymore. The next day, in an act of defiance, he set up on campus, in front of the student union. When he was arrested by the campus cops, students surrounded the police car and wouldn't let it move. Eventually the cops bailed, but they left Jack locked down in the back seat. People had managed to get a window down slightly, so they could pass him sandwiches and pop. But what he really needed, after many hours, was bathroom facilities. That amused a lot of people, but not Weinberg. I had no idea, nor did anyone else, that this was the beginning of the Free Speech Movement, or how important it would become. I was not an organizer or a speaker, just another enthusiastic FSMer at the huge noon rallies in Sproul Plaza. We voted on Savio's proposals by raising our orange registration cards. That was to demonstrate to the press that we were all Cal students, not the imaginary "outside agitators" they were obsessed with.

Some time later, after Chancellor Strong tried to re-punish people who had been arrested and sent to Santa Rita prison for occupying Sproul Hall, the faculty sided overwhelmingly with the students, gave the Chancellor a vote of no confidence and he resigned.



In my time at Cal, the insanity and police violence we endured from the FSM to People's Park to Cambodia Spring left the greatest impact on me. In 1969, after many students had been shot by the Alameda Sherriff's Deputies (known to us as "Blue Meanies"), Governor Reagan called up 10,000 National Guard troops and they bivouacked down by the Berkeley pier. There were guardsmen standing at every corner up and down University Avenue, with bayonets fixed, as the troop carriers moved up to the campus and back. Someone hung out a sign saying "Welcome to Prague." The experience of authority's use of naked force to suppress legal social protest stayed with

me throughout my life. However, there were teachers who had a great impact on me as well. Three stand out, after all these years: the poet Josephine Miles, who encouraged and fiercely supported me until her death; Steven Orgel, who rescued me when I was ambushed during my Ph.D. orals; and Fred Crews, who talked me out of following David Harris, turning in my draft card and spending five years in prison as a protest against the Vietnam War. “Where do you think you can do the most good—out here or in prison?” “Out here, I guess?”



*Berkeley, People's Park, 1969*

In graduate school I won a prize for a play entitled “Dino Compagni.” I wanted to write a Shakespearian play, but it ended up sounding more like Webster, which makes sense, because Jacobean drama is imitation Shakespeare without the master’s brilliance. My father was convinced the tragic main character was based on him. (It wasn’t.) And he said, “Where did you come from? You’re not like anyone else in this family.” (Probably true.) Much later, Robin Magowan told me that I

was the model for the character Wily Smith in David Lodge's *Changing Places*. I remember David as a soft-spoken, funny guy. When we chatted every morning in the English Department faculty lounge, I'd fill him in on the latest events in the People's Park fiasco. His wife kept calling from England. She feared for his life.

In 1972 I spent the summer in Sesimbra, a little fishing town south of Lisbon, Portugal. Only one person in the town spoke English, so I was forced to learn survival Portuguese. The villagers were the friendliest people I have ever met. My neighbor was a dispatcher for the bus line to Lisbon. He invited me to go with his drivers to net fish Portuguese-style. A stake was pounded into the sand and one end of the huge net was attached. A couple of men rowed out and laid the net parallel to the shore, then brought back the other end. All of us towed the ropes, and the towing got harder and harder. When we dragged the net on shore it was full of fish. The men made *caldeirada*, the regional fish stew, in a big pot on an open fire. After the meal, we drank a lot of *aguardente*. It was good times until we all went to a bar and continued to drink. When I started railing about Nixon and the Vietnam War, my friends went suddenly quiet. One whispered to me, in Portuguese, "They can't do anything to you. You can always go home. If we get in trouble, we disappear in the night and end up in a prison on the Tagus. We like you, but please don't do this again." I was mortified for having endangered those wonderful people. A different kind of ugly American. Two years later, in the bloodless revolution of 1974, the Portuguese overthrew their dictator and emptied that prison.

The next August I arrived in Rome to be a Fulbright Lecturer at the university—just in time for a terrible cholera epidemic. It

started when people ate contaminated clams and mussels from Naples Bay. Fearful of hurting tourism, the local authorities ignored the epidemic, even discharged seriously sick people from the hospital. It was a redo of *Death in Venice*. The epidemic raced north and hit Rome in a week. Tourists fled Italy quickly, but I was not a tourist. I had to stay. That was also the time of the Italian *Brigate Rosse*, the Red Brigades, and ferocious student activists. They were known to kneecap professors they didn't like. When a cadre of students confronted me in my office, because I hadn't given them all the same grade, my heart was beating out of my chest. I noticed that my colleagues and the staff had suddenly disappeared. But I confronted the students right back, claiming I was more radical than they were and that their demand was childish and reactionary. They grumbled, but left, and I collapsed on my desk chair.

I lived in a tiny apartment on a very fancy street, the Via Sistina, just down from the Spanish Steps where Keats died. Opening the shutters and leaning out my third story window to check the street action was a favorite pastime. There were the hookers on the church steps across the way, always scrapping with each other. The competition was tough; the girls on the Via Veneto a street away were the prettiest ones. I always felt sorry for the girl who watched her pals getting in cars, and was still there when they returned, waiting. One day I heard a loud screech, looked right and saw a car tearing around the corner on two wheels, another car in close pursuit, and two men, one in each car, leaning out their windows and shooting at each other. They were going so fast both cars were up the Via delle Quattro Fontane, over the hill and out of sight in seconds. But there were no sirens and the people on the street didn't seem to notice. I began to think it was a hallucination. Rome is my favorite city in the world. When I go back, I feel like I'm going

home. And Rome was always good to me. People told me I was *Garibaldi da giovane*, that I looked like a young Garibaldi. That was a high compliment.



*Fellini, across the street from my apartment*

One day, standing on my street, looking into a shop window, I felt a powerful presence. I turned and saw Fellini, raincoat thrown over his shoulder, about to enter his office. He was my surrealist idol and just a couple of feet away! Before he went in, he turned and gave me a knowing smile. That year in Rome also introduced me to the amazing poets of the Italian *neoavanguardia*. I began translating them, as well as other post-World War II poets. Several years later a 483 page anthology of my translations, *The New Italian Poetry: 1945 to the Present*, came out from the University of California Press.

Italian *poesia visiva*, visual poetry, interested me, and I wanted to produce some myself. However, it was quickly apparent to me that I couldn't do it without art training, so I went to art school at Eastern Michigan University, where I was an English professor. My mentor was a color painter and Josef Albers



fanatic. My passion was large swaths of raw canvas that I stained, overpainted and got lost in. More Sam Francis than Helen Frankenthaler, and certainly nowhere as good as either, but it was an exciting pursuit.

During that period I wanted to make poetry readings at the university less formal, more attractive to a general audience. We set up coffee house style readings at a joint at the edge of campus called Hungry Charley's: it was the "Hungry Ear Poetry Reading Series." Some of the people in those and other events were Diane Wakoski, Louis Simpson, Michael Harper, William Stafford, Jerome Rothenberg, W. S. Merwin, John Barth, Ishmael Reed, Maxine Hong Kingston, Nancy Willard, Gerald Vizenor, Edward Albee, Janet Kauffman, Amiri Baraka, Judith Minty, and Toni Cade Bambara. At the end of the series I persuaded James Wright to come out of retirement and give a reading. These were all highly energized events. Many of the performing writers looked nervous when I shepherded them into a small office in the back of Hungry Charley's. The mic and stool had not been placed, and the crowd hadn't showed up. Louis Simpson in particular was wondering what I had gotten him into. When the writers came out after my introduction, they loved it. They were not behind a podium but in the middle of their audience, which usually packed the place. Louis said it made him feel like a stand up comedian from the 50s.

In 1984 George Hitchcock announced that he was putting an end to *kayak*, after 20 years of publication. Many writers, including me, were stricken by the news. It had been the most iconoclastic and exciting avant-garde literary magazine in memory. It was so hard to land on its pages—getting published there was the highest badge of honor. George let me know

that he was considering passing the editorship to me. There were a couple of other candidates as well. A bit later he asked me to drive up to Santa Cruz for dinner. I was hoping that he had chosen me, but when the lamb stew had been consumed, he said that long consideration on the fate of *kayak* made him decide to “put a bullet through its head.” I knew he was right. It was, as he said, a one-man boat, and that man was George Hitchcock. But he went on to say that he thought I should do my own magazine rather than continuing on with another’s. Then he handed me the subscription and contributor address cards and said “You know, this is a valuable gift.” He was right. I wrote to those contributors when I started *Caliban* in 1986 and most of them enthusiastically embraced the new project. Even with all of the differences, I have always thought of *Caliban* as “Son of *kayak*.”



In the months of preparation before the first issue of *Caliban* went to press in 1986, I read an article on the success rate of literary magazines. Excluding magazines with institutional support, only a tiny fraction of new literary magazines make it to a third issue. I wasn’t at all sure I could overcome those

odds. Diane Wakoski, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Raymond Carver talked up *Caliban* everywhere they went. That certainly had a lot to do with the impressive list of contributors (including the three of them) in *Caliban #1*. Once the issue was delivered from the press, sent to distributors and subscribers, a great silence ensued. There was no way to know how it was being received. It was only later that I found out that Faye Kosmidis of DeBoer had it face out on every newsstand in New York City, as well as in all the bookstores. Then I got a postcard from Ted Joans, saying that *Caliban* was “VIP, very important publishing,” and the best new magazine since the debut of *The Evergreen Review*. It was very kind of him to say so, but I thought that was more than a bit hyperbolic. When we got a new magazine prize from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, I was surprised. Then Edouard Roditi introduced me to Andrei Codrescu in Paris and Andrei told me that he had given the first two issues a rave review on NPR’s “All Things Considered.” It seemed like the magazine, against all odds, had become a big success.



BARAKA • VIZZINO • MARTIN • MURPHY • HILL • ROBINSON • STOLOFF • FOX  
 PAUL • LERA • FLANAGAN • ALEXANDER • YANG • MI • ROBBINS • SLEBY • LIU  
 MILLER • GONZALEZ • HOUSTMAN • MALANGA • RAPHAEL • HEMAN • BURK  
 LISHIN • HESS • LANZA • VASSILAKIS • WESLOWSKI • MCCRARY • WAYMAN  
 SMALLFIELD • CARRILLO • GREGORY • FAIRCHILD • GRANTMONT BY NGAI

The reason I was in Paris was a Fulbright research fellowship to study the cross-pollination of the Italian *neoavanguardia* and the French *tel quel* in the 50s and 60s. While working on the Italian anthology I ran across a statement by Phillippe Sollers saying how much the Italian writers had influenced his group. I stayed with Antonio Porta and his family in Milan for a month and spent another month in Rome, interviewing a number of Italian writers and critics. They were quite generous in their evaluation of the French and thought there had been a real give and take between the two groups. The Italian literary grapevine was amazingly efficient. By the time I talked to people, they had already heard about my project and were excited. That grapevine must have included the French *tel quel* group, because when I arrived in Paris they were laying for me. Most were polite, but adamant that the Italians had no influence on them. Only Denis Roche was honest, saying of course there was an influence, primarily the poet Edoardo Sanguinetti, who lived in France during that period. (Sanguinetti was writing poetry that looked like *nouveau roman* well before Robbe-Grillet's first book.) When I went to the offices of *Editions du Seuil* to interview Sollers, I was seated on a small chair between two high wooden desks, Marcelyn Pleynet on my left and Sollers on my right. Receiving verbal attacks from both sides, it was like being dragged before the Tribune, between Danton and Robespierre. Sollers utterly denied that his famous quote was anything more than a meaningless compliment. It was clear to me that they were trying to protect their historical reputation as innovators by intimidating me. I knew about French chauvinism, but I had never experienced anything like this before. At another time, in an argument with a French intellectual, I was told that basically all cultural innovation came from France. After arguing about Italian Futurism vs. Cubism, I said what about the Renaissance?

Didn't that start in Italy? He thought for a bit, then said of course the Italians were crazy radicals, and they had some interesting half-baked ideas, but the French always improved on them. After all, Italy wasn't really European; it was like a pier jutting into the Mediterranean, almost to Africa.

Editing *Caliban* kept me very busy in the late 80s and early 90s, but I had other projects as well as the magazine. In 1988 my first book of poetry came out from Montparnasse Editions. Many of the poems were written in Hawaii, when I was a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii. I had three great blurbs on the book jacket, but my favorite was Maxine Hong Kingston's:

*Lawrence R. Smith in The Plain Talk of the Dead, more than any poet I've read, sees and hears the presence of ancestors who are not only European but Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Mexican, African, Hawaiian. His surrealism is necessary, active, intelligent, and American. He opens his reader's eyes wide.*

A few years later Wesleyan University Press published my translation of Antonio Porta's landmark novel, *The King of the Storeroom* (*Il re del magazzino*). His fascinating take on the collapse of humanity comes through the eyes of a starving narrator who has outlasted most others by finding a storeroom with some food (mostly raw turnips) in the countryside. Porta's book was written in the mid-70s, long before post-apocalyptic novels were in fashion. I started the translation while staying with Antonio and his family in 1987, but sadly he didn't live to see it published.

As far back as the late 60s, when I was in graduate school, I had the desire to write an epic with everybody in it, a book

that reflected our mixed culture and people. As time went on, I knew that Native American cultures would be central and that the book would be a novel. But I also knew that if I were to write a book called *The Map of Who We Are*, I'd have to do a lot of traveling and talk to a lot of people across the country. I took a leave from teaching in 1990-91 and had my teenage son enroll in college correspondence courses. We spent a year driving coast-to-coast. Some high points were talking to Lakota leaders at Pine Ridge in South Dakota, and to the head of the Makah reservation at the end of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, and a three-day Cheyenne-Arapaho pow wow in Colony, Oklahoma as the guests of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds and his family. But a lot of the trip was just going from town to town and talking to people everywhere we went. Writing this novel was the hardest thing I've ever done. It took me 7 years. I knew that if I couldn't successfully complete it, the failure would haunt me for the rest of my life. Those are high stakes. And I didn't know I could finish it until I wrote the last line. The book came out in Gerald Vizenor's American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series at the Oklahoma University Press in 1997.

In the Fall of 2003 I was Visiting Professor at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, teaching American Literature. Hong Kong is a fascinating place and Clearwater Bay, where the University is located, is gorgeous. It is a beautiful coastal area dotted with green cone-shaped islands. All the Hong Kong movie studios are located there and most of the historical movies are shot there. It was also an opportunity for me to work on a translation of the collected poems of the distinguished Chinese poet Yang Mu. My co-translator, Michelle Yeh, was there as well as Yang Mu himself. The volume, *No Trace of the Gardener*, came out from Yale University Press in 1998.

When I returned to California from Hong Kong I decided to get involved in some kind of community work. Someone suggested volunteering at Mary's Kitchen, a soup kitchen and clothing distribution site in the city of Orange run by a 92-year-old retired Irish nurse. Like most people, I thought I knew the kind of folks that frequented this kind of place. And like most people, I was entirely wrong. There were elderly people, living exclusively on Social Security. They had a choice: pay the rent or eat. They couldn't do both. Many of the regulars were in that category. The same dilemma faced younger people when one or both spouses had lost jobs. They would often arrive with children in a nice car, but they were trying to hang on to a house or an apartment with their diminishing savings. There were people who "lived on the street," or more specifically under bridges, in cars, in wooded areas next to freeways, or anyplace they could escape notice. People who tell you homeless people prefer to live on the street are nuts. The conditions are miserable and it is dangerous. Furthermore, once on the street it is next to impossible to get off. In order to rent an apartment you need first and last, and you need to look presentable, which is difficult at best when you live outdoors. Mary had come to the U. S. in 1922 to escape the chaos in Ulster. She had a big heart. When she saw homeless people in a park, she decided it was her moral duty to feed them. After being chased out of the park by angry neighbors, she relocated to a trailer in the Orange DPW's storage lot, next to railroad tracks. She gave everyone donuts and bagels for breakfast, then a hot lunch, and a bag dinner sandwich to take away. I was in charge of cooking pasta dishes and vegetables on a massive scale every Friday. The regulars nicknamed me "Pastaman." Still struggling with my first novel, some of the volunteers urged me to write a book about Mary and her vocation. That just made me angry—for them to order up a new novel when I wasn't even sure

about finishing the one I was working on. Miraculously, as I was finishing the last pages of *The Map of Who We Are*, the book that would be *Annie's Soup Kitchen* was coming to me in big chunks, faster than I could take notes. It was published several years later in William Kittredge's Literature of the American West Series at the Oklahoma University Press.

Just past Y2K I began to take a particular interest in shooting movies. Wanting to do a short, and knowing that it would take some level of expertise to do this, I enrolled at Santa Ana College in the Television and Video Department. It was well-respected, with a number of well-known alumni, including Will Ferrell. Two years later I was ready to direct *Truck Girl*, a twenty minute short. It was a great experience, but not one I would likely repeat. It cost more money than projected. We naively planned for a significant number of interior and exterior locations, including a stretch of the old Route 66. Scenes with motorcycles speeding down the freeway (shot out the back of my Miata) were crazy, but actually worked. Great cast (including Maxine and Earll Kingston), great crew, and we won the Award for Excellence for Short Features at the 2003 Berkeley Video & Film Festival.





In 2010 I decided to do an online revival of my old magazine, *Caliban*. Being computer illiterate, I turned to Daniel Estrada Del Cid, the man who had done such a marvelous job of editing *Truck Girl*. He was familiar with the old print magazine from the 80s and 90s, so he duplicated its look and format, this time as a virtual magazine. The reception was immediately enthusiastic. Each issue reached thousands of readers worldwide, far more than the circulation of the original print *Caliban*. Many of the old contributors returned to participate in *Calibanonline*. (All 40 issues are still available to be viewed without cost at [www.calibanonline.com](http://www.calibanonline.com).) However, as I tried to recontact writers in 2010, the number who had either passed away or were no longer writing was overwhelming. And it was so painful during the 10 years of *Calibanonline* to write the many memoriams for great friends who were also great writers and artists. But the real surprise in that incarnation of the magazine was how important art had become. We had wonderful color covers on the old print *Caliban*, but all the interior art was either line drawings or half tones. With *Calibanonline* all our art, cover and interior, was in bright, crisp, luminous color. Ricardo Paullosa, poet and renowned art critic and collector, generously jumpstarted us by suggesting to the many artists he knew that they should send work our way. Others came to our pages from a multiplicity of sources. We became a significant art venue, and since we had no ads, there was never a conflict of interest in the selection process.

*Calibanonline* ran as a quarterly, 40 issues in 10 years. It was the hardest grind I have ever experienced as an editor. But when we put out the last issue in July of 2021, Daniel Estrada Del Cid, the Production and Design Editor, my wife Deanne C. Smith, the Associate Editor, and I had a feeling of great accomplishment.





