

THE CHAPARRALIAN

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The ShrubPeople

A silhouette of a person wearing a cap and jacket, holding a large pine tree aloft with their right arm. The person is standing in a field of tall grass. The background is a bright blue sky with a network of bare, thin branches crisscrossing it. The overall scene is captured in a low-angle, backlit perspective, creating a dramatic, high-contrast effect.

The Chaparralian #38

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The Chaparralian is the quarterly journal of the California Chaparral Institute, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is dedicated to the preservation of native shrubland ecosystems and supporting the creative spirit as inspired by the natural environment. To join the Institute and receive *The Chaparralian*, please visit our website or fill out and mail in the slip below. We welcome unsolicited submissions to *The Chaparralian*. Please send to: rwh@californiachaparral.org or via post to the address below.

You can find us on the web at www.californiachaparral.org

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Cover photograph: There comes a time when direct action is the only alternative. Unknown Chaparral Warrior pulling up a non-native pine tree that had been planted in the proposed Grizzly Bear National Monument.

Photo upper left: Manzanita red and Engelmann oak gray with splotches of lichen and green moss.

All photos by Richard Halsey unless indicated otherwise.

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NASCENT THOUGHTS

Few, if any, government agencies will turn down money, regardless of how it's acquired or how it will be used.

After spending years to help (then force by court order) San Diego County **to recognize the value of science** in their approach to land management and fire protection, I stopped being surprised by their continual resistance when I realized that logic did not dictate policy. It was policy via millions of dollars in federal grants:

<http://www.californiachaparral.org/dsdcountyslashburn.html>

After spending more than 6 months trying to help correct the injustice caused by **the capricious actions of the San Diego Rural Fire Protection District** against a private citizen (actions blindly supported by the County's tax collector and the Board of Supervisors), I came to realize the battle was not about what was right, but over money. The County was in line to collect more than \$70,000 for the unauthorized vegetation clearance of less than 1/2 acre of Joseph Diliberti's property. The County and the private contractors who do the work are able to collect tens of thousands of dollars every year from vulnerable citizens in this way:

<http://www.californiachaparral.org/josephdiliberti.html>

At first, I was shocked to learn that the US Forest Service intended to "replant" 3 million pine trees within the 2009 Station Fire scar in the Angeles National Forest in a manner that would likely cause the **type-conversion of sensitive bigcone Douglas-fir stands**. Then I discovered the money trail: \$1.5 million from Chevron Oil to "mitigate" the pollution they cause in El Segundo. This is the same company that's spending millions of dollars on a public relations campaign aimed to convince us that they really care about the environment. It's also the same company that refuses to solve the environmental disaster and the humanitarian crisis they caused by dumping billions of gallons of toxic waste in the rainforests of Ecuador:

<http://chevrontoxico.com/>

Even though the USFS states that one purpose of the replanting project is to "*expedite the recovery of bigcone Douglas-fir forest conditions that existed prior to the 2009 Station Fire,*" they will be planting Coulter pines in the burned Doug-fir stands instead because, "*sufficient quantities of bigcone Douglas-fir seedlings are not available*" in 2011. Without a pause, the Forest Service then blandly admits that "*Any Coulter pine site conversion resulting from the planting effort would decrease the pre-fire bigcone Douglas-fir acres.*"

The Forest Service's tree planting effort is especially egregious because **it violates the agency's own land management plan** that designates the bigcone Doug-fir as a special indicator species that needs protection because its populations are declining: "*The primary management concern in lower montane habitats is the loss of bigcone Douglas-fir populations...*" (pg 92 in the Final EIS of the Forest Plan). Also, "*Bigcone Douglas-fir forests provide habitat for the California spotted owl, a Forest Service sensitive species, as well as many other animals*" (pg 128).

To defend their need to start the project immediately without properly investigating its possible impacts, the USFS claimed to reporters that they didn't know where the Doug-fir stands were and that, well, their efforts can't be perfect.

The fact of the matter is that the USFS knows exactly where the Doug-fir stands were and has been made aware by their own staff of the negative impacts that will likely occur if they introduce Coulter pines into the mix.

When money is available, be it for grinding up the landscape, violating personal rights, or planting trees where they don't belong, logic, testimony, or letters are politely acknowledged but typically dismissed. The frustration this causes leads many to look to the courts for help, or in the lead story in this issue, to take direct action. *Pugnare pro veritas.*

Been Dead for Awhile

By Richard Halsey

Part I

On the way into town, Hart stopped alongside the dirt road at his favorite spot to soak in the view: unbroken miles of undulating hills covered in the thick velveteen fur of chaparral.

The “No Trespassing” sign was nailed into the trunk of the old oak. Barbed wire had been wrapped around the tree’s girth long ago. Both sign and wire were slowly being engulfed by the growing bark.

“Bastards. Should have taken care of this a long time ago,” Hart muttered to himself. He pried the sign loose and threw it like a Frisbee into the stream in the canyon below. The nail remained in the oak; twisted, rusty, stuck.

Clear snot started running down Cody’s upper lip. He rubbed his knuckle into his nose and tried to wipe the flow away. He paused, hand still stuck to his face, and looked around to see if anyone in the group was watching.

“With the help of volunteers like you,” the tall, lean man with a green Forest Service jacket and badge said, “we’ll be planting trees in canyons like this to restore our forest to what it was before the fire.”

Cody rubbed the back of his hand on the leg of his faded Levis, and then peered into the canyon below. He raised his hand. “The trees you’re plantin’... they the same ones that were here before?”

The man smiled. “Well, mostly. We don’t have enough bigcone Douglas-fir so we’re planting these.” He pointed to several hundred Coulter pine saplings in little, black pots lying on the ground. He began to talk about how the new trees will help clean the air, when the young man raised his hand again.

“Why don’t you wait until you have the right ones? And from what I can see, looks like they’re coming up down there by themselves anyway.”

The man smiled again. “Well, we need to act now. We know we may not be 100% or even 80% accurate in what we’re doing, but we have these trees and the money to do the job. There’s a little saying about the perfect being the enemy of the good...”

Cody ignored the reply and whispered to the girl standing next to him, “This is such bullshit.”

“Saw the sticker on your truck,” the older man said to Hart while standing in line at the old Owl Coffee House. “Who’d you fight fire for?”

“Don’t anymore. Used to work for the Forest Service, though.”

“Well, they’ve certainly had their hands full the past few years. All that overgrown brush out there. It should have been cleared years ago.”

Hart’s face grimaced. “It’s nature, not brush.”

“Yeah, my sister’s place up in the mountains burned down in the last fire,” the man continued, ignoring Hart’s comment. “Damn environmentalists kept her from clearin’ off her land. It’s...”

Hart cut him off. “Why’s she livin’ up there?”

“It’s a beautiful place. Quiet. Can’t hear nothin’ ’cept for the coyotes.”

“Nature,” Hart responded. “That’s why she’s there.”

“Here’s your coffee, sir.”

Hart turned to the lady at the counter. “Thanks.” Walking past the old man, he gave a polite nod, and left.

Reaching his pickup truck, Hart set his coffee on the bumper and dug his fingernails into the small firefighter decal on the back window, peeling it off. “Tired of this shit,” he whispered to himself. He shoved the crumpled remains into his pocket.

Entering the cab and closing the door, Hart lit up a cigarette and turned on the stereo. Johnny Cash. *Hurt*. He stared through the glass windows of the coffee house, seeing the old man. “What an ass.” He took a long drag, then slowly blew smoke out his nostrils, filling the compartment with a blue haze.

As he backed his pickup out of the stall, the sign on the curb became visible: *Parking for Dry Cleaners Only*.

Late that afternoon, as the group was about to leave, Cody slipped away and ran back to the rows of baby Coulter pine trees. He bent down on his knees and systematically snapped the neck of about twenty. “Here’s to the Doug-fir and the chaparral, ya stupid little weeds.”

Hart sat at the round kitchen table in his small Los Angeles apartment when he heard the sound of soft footsteps on the ground outside. He flipped on the front porch light and lifted the window shade. Nothing.

The back French doors flew open and slammed shut with the sound of tenuous glass within flimsy wooden frames.

“People are stupid,” Cody said as he stomped into the tiny kitchen and pulled open the refrigerator: beer, sprouts, goat cheese, a jar of peanut butter, and some



Bigcone Douglas-fir resprouting after a fire.

bread. He grabbed the peanut butter, opened it, and reached in with his finger to pull out a taste. “Do this, do that. Damn it, it pisses me off.”

“Bad day at the ole’ junior college, Cody?” Hart asked.

“This Icabod Crane tree lover guy on the field trip went on and on about how we gotta plant all these trees in the hills 'cuz, after all, we know better than nature, and chaparral sucks and, by the way, aren’t I cool with my green jacket with the badge and all. Damn it! All that nature crap of yours is starting to rub off on me.”

Hart sipped his Jack Daniels and ginger ale. It was his third for the night. He looked up and smiled at his young housemate. “Yeah, maybe.” He swirled the contents of his glass. “That’s my old employer, ‘one hundred years of type convertin’ the land and serving the loudest politicians.’”

Cody was nineteen, brilliant, with an edgy cynicism one only acquires after years of dealing with mean streets or, like Hart, mind-numbing bureaucracies. He had dropped out of school and left home at fifteen, after one too many teachers had pushed him into a corner. He went to New York City to play music in a band with a friend of his, but ended up on the street doing improv theater instead. He made a pretty good living from passersby who dropped change into a wooden box as he performed various Shakespearean-inspired skits with a small troupe of actors.

“Fools, tourists, politicians, open your minds; we come to rejoice in the bitter truth, not to bury it, as you all so eagerly do.”

Why Cody ended up in Los Angeles was something he wouldn’t talk about, even with Hart, at least not yet. They had met while Hart was tacking up a "roommate wanted" ad on the bulletin board outside the Owl Coffee House.

“You need a roomie?” Cody asked, his eyes squinting as cigarette smoke curled around his face.

Hart turned and looked at the young man, sizing him up. “Yeah, lookin’. Not sure I need another smoker around, though. Tryin’ to quit.”

“We’re all tryin’ to quit somethin’, man,” Cody said while nodding at the telltale shape in Hart’s flannel shirt pocket and offering his lighter.

Hart was a forty-something self-described iconoclast who had recently quit his job with the Forest Service to try to make a living as a writer. His parting with the government was by mutual agreement. Hart’s tendency to discuss agency failures – and the sexual behavior of various wild creatures – with the public, eventually provided his boss enough ammunition to convince the regional office to force him out.

Hart got wind of his pending removal and decided to leave on his own terms. “Road kill might counteract some of the Novocaine running through those calcified veins of yours,” he said to the district ranger after dropping the carcass of a dead skunk on the man’s desk.

Mephitis mephitis, Latin for a *noxious exhalation from the earth*, times two. It took several weeks for the fragrance to disappear from the building. A faint hint remained in the wood of the desktop for months.

Cody tossed the peanut butter back into the refrigerator, slammed the door, and nodded at Hart’s Camel Blues. “Those will kill ya, ya know.”

They both smiled as Hart lit one for Cody.

“You know,” Hart said, “we should start a group to give those damn tree people some competition. We’ll get rid of all the tree plantations and restore the landscape to what it once was. What it should be. Bring back the shrubs!”

“I don’t do groups.”

Let’s toast to anarchy then,” Hart replied. He poured Cody a drink and tapped his glass. “Eyes.”

“Power to the shrub people, man,” Cody shot back, “whoever they might be.”

The pair talked for a while longer until the topic became stale, the glasses were empty, and the silence made Hart uncomfortable.

“Time to hit it,” Hart said. “You’ve got school and

I've got that damn party to go to tomorrow."

Cody got up and walked toward his room. He turned while fussing with his brown, disheveled hair. "Some day Hart, you'll get to know yourself."

"Yeah, and I suspect you'll be there pointing the way, buddy."

"Yup."

He was late, again. Waiting at the stop sign, Hart fumbled with his tie.

Looking in the rearview mirror, he tried to adjust his collar so the constriction around his neck appeared less contrived. "Damn noose."

His pickup truck powered forward, ascending a long, narrow driveway cut through chaparral and decomposed granite. The road was unpaved, so dust collected on the surrounding vegetation, covering otherwise healthy things with the detritus of earthen scars. In some places, naked roots exposed by road cuts still clung to remnants of soil like chunks of concrete on rebar, remnants of an unnatural violation.

Parking was difficult, since most of the empty lot space was filled with cars of guests more eager than he. However, people were still milling around inside the house so he knew he had successfully avoided an awkward mid-dinner arrival. Children were playing outside in the warm, evening air, parents ignoring them with adult conversations indoors. Moths and other nocturnal insects were organizing their own get-together around various patio lights.

"Nice place. Beautiful evening isn't it? How are you? Fine, thanks. Hello. Hey! Lots of people tonight, eh? How's a guy supposed to get a drink around here?" Finding the beer in a patio ice chest, Hart grabbed a bottle and spied the perfect escape route, kids in the backyard. No one noticed his departure.

A boy about eight years old was his first encounter with a friendly life form.

"Hey little amigo, what's up?"

"Watchin' bats."

The boy directed Hart's attention toward a nearby floodlight attached to the top of a bare metal pole ten feet high. Hundreds of nocturnal insects were flying around it like frenzied fighter jets doing elaborate figure eights and high speed bombing runs toward the ground.

"Look, there's one!" screeched the boy.

"I don't know, looks kinda like a giant moth. A sphinx maybe."

"No way!" The boy was indignant.

"Moths can get pretty big, you know. If somebody would catch it we could take a closer look with this." Hart pulled a small hand lens out of his pocket.

The moth continued making huge arcs above the light, sweeping back toward the ground in a giant, spiral dance. Then, as if being sucked to the earth by a powerful magnet, the sphinx landed, raising a small puff of dust.

The boy shouted to his friends. Within moments a cluster of curious, amateur entomologists gathered around the creature, wings quivering, compound eyes reflecting a thousand lights.

"Got him!" Within the boy's cupped hands the prisoner's wings made soft fluttering sounds.

"Open your hands a bit and I'll get a hold of him so everyone can see." More kids came over.

Hart surrendered his lens to a little girl in the group as the boy released his captive into Hart's curled palm, gripping its wings with his fingers. Six legs wiggled across his flesh in an attempt to find traction. A slight chill ran down Hart's back; an alien presence exploring soft, human skin. "Watch this." Holding its fat body, Hart spread out the moth's hind wing to reveal bright, red bands.

"That's a moth?" one of the girls asked in disbelief after seeing the colors.



“Hi,” she said to Hart while joining the boiling sea of little heads and hands.

“Hi,” he replied back in a phlegm-filtered voice. He quickly cleared his throat, feeling lame over his response.

“Whatcha guys doin’?”

“We’re checkin’ out a moth. It’s really cool. Wanna see?” asked the boy holding the hand lens.

Van looked up at Hart, asking permission with slightly raised eyebrows, then another smile.

“Yeah. You’d be surprised how beautiful moths can be. Use the lens and get a closer look.”

The girl began moving the lens back and forth over the wing, keeping her distance from the wiggling insect. “I can’t see anything!”

“Put the lens right next to your eye, babe.”

After hesitating, the girl followed his suggestion and moved within a couple inches of her target. “Whoa! I can see like feather things. There’s a thousand of ‘em! They’re all over the place!”

“Lemme see, lemme see!” The scene became an explosion of curiosity as a chorus of oohs and ahhs filled the evening air as each kid took a turn.

“Hey Van, come see!” one of the kids cried out.

Several adults were clustered in a patio nearby, observing the scene with approving smiles. A young blonde woman was in the mix. The place was filled with puffed up coiffures, desk bellies hanging over Ralph Lauren belts, shiny shirts and cocktails in hand. But there she was, wearing Levi’s with a white, ribbed tank top, a blue flannel shirt, and drinking a beer. She made eye contact with Hart, exchanging a smile with him.

“Van, come see!” the kids kept shouting.

Hart nodded.

The little boy handed her the lens and was reabsorbed by the amoeboid mass of childhood.

“Put it close to your eye,” Hart said automatically, “and move toward the wing until it comes into focus.” He began shifting his position to improve the lighting and raised the moth to her level. Her blond hair slid across his wrist. Hart detected a faint scent of Burt’s Bees shampoo.

“Yeah, I remember, Jim,” she said with a trace of regretful familiarity that hung in the air like a floating feather that wouldn’t drop.

Van pushed one side of her hair over her ear and moved the lens across the wing in a determined pattern, pausing for a moment on one spot, then moving to another. “Hey! I see them,” she said for the benefit of the kids. “Yeah, they’re like little shingles on a roof.”

The kids all cheered.

Van turned and shouted to her friends to come and share in the experience. She looked up at Hart for a brief moment. No smile this time. He looked back as long as he could, then cast his eyes away.

As the kids watched, adults slowly approached,

huddling around the discovery scope and its new owner. Aware the big people were appropriating their adventure, they began giggling and pushing each other, making plans to find another mystery. Within moments the kids were dashing off in different directions, disappearing into the darkness of the large backyard.

Hart listened as the adults shared enthusiasm with each other. For a brief moment, suits and fancy dresses could have been replaced with shorts and grass-stained jeans. The only difference between the adults and kids was height.

From the house came a shout announcing dinner. Returning from the darkness, dozens of children ran toward the catered displays of sirloin burgers and white corn. The adults all turned and walked away calmly, ice tinkling in their glasses.

Walking toward the dinner line, Hart looked around for her familiar face, but found nothing.

“Burger, sir?”

“No thanks. Vegetarian. I’ll go for the corn.”

“Yes, it was a wonderful party. Drive carefully. Bye. See you Monday. You bet! Sure were a lot of folks here tonight. Thanks.”
Passing through the front entryway, Hart felt a sense of relief as escape was now assured. His pickup called to him like a lost friend.

Suddenly, from the left side she touched his arm. Van. “Sorry I disappeared,” she said, pausing for a moment on the dirt driveway while walking toward her old Jeep.

“Oh, yeah. Well, it’s O.K.”

She smiled as she moved slowly away. “You were good with the

kids back there. Haven’t lost your touch.” She hesitated as if waiting for something, but thought better of it and turned away, her long hair sweeping across her back like a curtain closing over a bedroom window.

“Good-bye,” he whispered. She didn’t hear him.

He walked down the road to his pickup truck. Plenty of parking spaces now. Opening the door, he heard a faint screech of a barn owl overhead. He leaned against the truck and listened for more: a chorus of frogs in a nearby moist place, a lone tree cricket trilling its song in some bush close by, and sycamore leaves rustling with the evening breeze. The owl screeched again, but much farther away. Down the hill was the city’s glow, suburbia slamming up against the wild. Isolated islands of scrub oak and sage, surrounded by freeways and subdivisions.

“Bats, moths, girl,” he thought to himself, each with its own design, its own way to survive.

Detecting tiny molecules of female passion a mile away, male silk moths follow air currents to find their partners. Once together, the female withdraws her scent to secure her selected mate’s status for life, a very short life. Prevented from feeding because of atrophied mouthparts, the pair live their last hours fulfilling their sole function in life as adults, procreation.

“What a way to go,” Hart whispered while exhaling.



Rare Lichen of the Southern California Chaparral

By Kerry Knudsen

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In Southern California lichens are frequent on chaparral, especially on chamise. The most common species are the iridescent yellow *Candelaria pacifica* M. Westb. and the bright orange *Xanthoria tenax* L. Lindblom, both of which can coat branches. In old-growth chaparral and on younger chaparral that has not burned frequently, especially in more humid micorhabitats, you can find a more diverse assemblage of leafy and branching lichens such as the blackish *Kaernefeltia merrillii* (Du Rietz) Thell & Goward, *Hypogymnia imshaugii* Krog with its hollow branches, and several small *Usnea* species looking like the green hair of trolls. In areas where fire frequency is high, often no lichens can be found for hundreds of acres.

Besides the common *Candelaria pacifica*, *Xanthoria tenax*, and the larger leafy and branching lichens, one can observe small crusts growing especially on old-growth chaparral. Based on observations from our current inventory and taxonomic work, we believe these crustose species are rapidly disappearing in southern California with increased fire frequency and reduction in chaparral habitat. This of course needs verification through ecological studies and long-term monitoring, but nonetheless we share some of our observations, which we hope will stimulate further scientific studies.

We know that two species of crustose lichens that once occurred on chaparral may now be extinct. The first is *Bacidia jacobii* (Tuck.) Hasse. This species was collected in San Diego County, probably on maritime chaparral by the botanical explorer Bolander in the 19th century. The only existing specimen of this species is in the Farlow Herbarium (FH) at Harvard University. The illustration of this species in this issue

of *The Chaparralian*, taken from the original collection by Dr. Michaela Schmull (FH), is the first image ever published. *Bacidia jacobii* may have been naturally rare and extirpated by the clearing of chaparral during the urbanization of San Diego, with surviving populations disappearing during any number of fires. The second possibly extinct species, *Bacidia veneta* S. Ekman, was commonly in chaparral in the Santa Monica Mountains at least before 1913 (Hasse 1913). It would have been collected in several canyons, such as Santa Ynez Canyon, Santa Monica Canyon, Sullivan Canyon, and Topanga Canyon. It has never been collected outside of the Santa Monica Mountains. It may either have been an ancient relic species like the redwoods or a newly evolved species with a restricted range. These canyons all supported a rich and diverse lichen flora on the barks of trees and chaparral that has been extirpated, especially by fire (Knudsen & Kocourková 2009a & 2010). At least 105 lichens may have been extirpated from the Santa Monica Mountains since 1915, a majority on bark and wood, based on our latest unpublished historical research at Harvard, the Smithsonian Institution, and the New York Botanical Garden.

In areas where fire frequency is high, often no lichens can be found for hundreds of acres.

The Pechanga *Cyphelium*. *Cyphelium brachysporum* Nádv., previously discussed in [The Chaparralian](#) (Knudsen & Kocourková. 2008), is currently exceeding rare. It was described from Murrieta in Riverside County, but now it is known only from Montaña de Oro and San Simeon in San Luis Obispo County, an area with extremely low fire frequency.

Pechanga *Cyphelium* is probably extirpated from most of southern California by the reduction of habitat by development and increased anthropogenic fires (Knudsen & Kocourková 2008; Lendemer et al. 2008).

At least two species we have recently described from chaparral and coastal sage shrub are rare and could become extinct in the next hundred years. Munz's Lecanora, *Lecanora munzii* K. Knudsen & Lendemer, was recently described from the Bernard Biological Field Station in Claremont (Knudsen & Lendemer 2009). It is known from scattered locations with low fire frequency in southern California on old growth chaparral and coastal sage shrub on dead branches and fallen wood. Some lichens that grow on native wood can grow on abandoned lumber and old untreated wood fences, but Munz's Lecanora does not appear to be able to adapt to man-made substrates. San Simeon Lecanora, *Lecanora simeonensis* K. Knudsen & Lendemer, described from San Simeon, can thrive on old ranch fences in coastal central California (Lendemer & Knudsen 2009). It is naturally found on extremely dried wood in native Monterey pine forests in Cambria and in Morro Bay Manzanita chaparral in Montaña de Oro. It was recently discovered in southern California on chamise wood in Weir Canyon in the Santa Ana Mountains but was probably extirpated in the fire of 2007 started by an arsonist (Knudsen & Kocourková 2009b). The first author and Dick Newell recently collected it on the weathered wood of a walkway in Newport's Back Bay, which means it is hopefully growing somewhere along the coast on old growth chaparral or coastal sage shrub that has escaped some of the catastrophic coastal fires in Orange County.

While we continue to study and inventory lichens on chaparral and coastal sage shrubs in southern and central California, we hope that more populations of all these species may be discovered. If new populations are discovered, they may be conserved through protection from vegetation clearance or controlled burns as well as from development. However, they cannot be protected from the catastrophic fires caused by arson or careless maintenance of power lines or other anthropogenic causes. It is generally recognized in scientific circles that we are living during a major extinction event caused primarily by humanity and that between 15-50% of all the world's more than ten million species may become extinct in the next fifty to one hundred years. Experts, of course, differ about causes and results, but we know that at least two lichen species of the southern California chaparral may be extinct and three others are apparently

so rare that they could disappear during in the next hundred years through poor management or a series of catastrophic fires.

Prague, September, 2010



The possibly extinct lichen, *Bacidia jacobii*. The dark oval shapes are the apothecial discs or permanent fruiting bodies of the lichens. Photo: Michaela Schnull.

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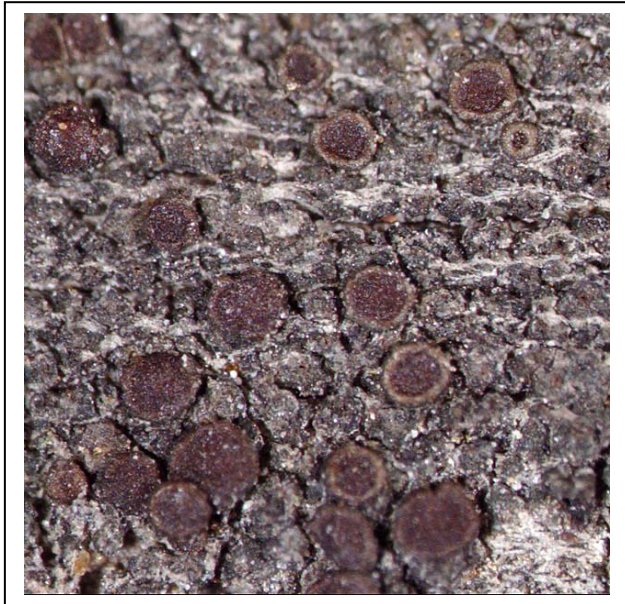
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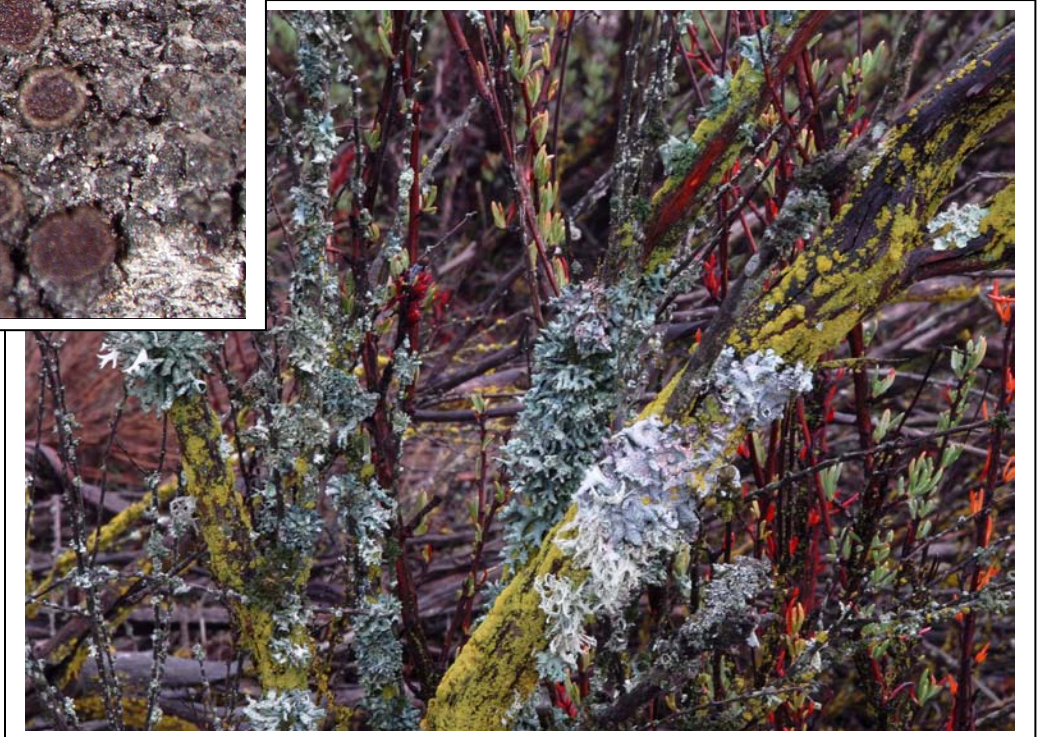
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Left: *Lecanora munzii*. Photo: J.C. Lendemer.

Below: A canvas of color-lichens in old growth chamise chaparral. Photo: Richard Halsey



Poetry from a Kindred Spirit

By Wayne T. Williams, Ph.d

Tunes of the Western Chaparral

The dissonance of dismantling ecosystems

I

RATTLER!!!

The coils of that black venomous serpent
 Shook nine rattles at the end of his strong body
 Struck at us—almost too close for an instant leap away
 His jaws agape aimed dual drops of venom
 Glistening from his fangs
 Enough to stop us easy in a few agonizing hours
 He knew it; so did we.
 Glaring at us, he was fearless
 He was in control,
 We leapt away so fast,
 Like Olympic stars in the broad jump
 So scared, we properly observed
 His might and danger, from a discrete distance.
 We watched with envy and awe
 Seeing such reptilian power
 So close under the chaparral oak shadows
 Cryptic with his indigo translucent scales
 His arched and weaving body danced
 Only a yard away, less than when he started his
 Buzzing rattles near my legs,
 Sounding in a wild treble clef
 Guarding the path to his home
 His vertical slit eyes and probing tongue
 Knew where we were every second
 We were the intruders; not him.
 We walked on after a few minutes of fascinated observation
 Of that magnificent creature,
 Humbled by the wilderness, knowing our place
 On that trail, watching each next step carefully
 From then on.

II

We in our ignorance were destroying his habitat
 Pulverizing every branch of shade and niche in the chaparral
 Forsaking it all for "fire control"
 Masticating it down to dust, the chamise went to mulch
 On that red rich earth of the California
 Benevolent chaparral
 We killed all the birds' nests
 Rabbits hopped scared away this way and that
 Lizards slithered in fright from the beating
 Machines, wood rat nests of sticks
 Three hundred years old mounded into
 Impregnable subtle sculptures of inside tunnels
 Disappeared under the machines;
 Power from death machines
 Giant grinders and mowers
 Masticating, chewing, consuming with iron jaws
 Every living ex-labyrinth of eco-niches.

III

The earlier seventy-mile-an-hour firestorm scorched the county
 The fires ate 4000 houses.
 None of those houses respected Nature
 All of those houses were doomed to ash
 Everyone knew it and everyone ignored the facts:
 Chaparral burns. Probability coefficient: ONE.
 If you build your house in the chaparral, it will burn down.
 Period.
 Seven years later the chaparral recovered
 We continued our hatred of the brush mingled with insurance claims post incineration.

IV

Make another rich man richer
 Raising cows and race horses
 Over the graves of the snake and his neighbors
 Extolling the power of beef
 On the marketplace and cleared range,
 Racing at Del Mar.

V

Now the chaparral is dead
 Our benevolent friend
 Passed away.
 The precious ecosystem wasn't our enemy
 But we defiled it anyway
 There it suffers in its dead complexity
 No more chamise
 The manzanita has disappeared
 The oaks are moaning for the loss of their brothers
 Lending integrity to the moors
 The finest biodiversity in the nation
 Replaced by cows and plugs.

VI

Now it's just rich mens' play
 We paid for it all
 With precious taxpayer's monies
 Kids in Normal Heights go hungry
 The rancher bitched about
 Not enough brush being cleared
 And bought another custom silk cowboy hat for riding
 Through the chaparral with a pair of anaconda boots
 To avoid snake bite.
 Up to his knees went the anaconda skin
 And swallowed him in indifference.
 The snakes and lizards and toads and badgers and pumas and coyotes and great golden
 Eagles in the bush
 All lay dead.

VII

The fires will come nevertheless
The mansions will burn to the ground again
The vinyl white fences will melt
In bizarre shapes and grotesque melt.
The horses in their trapped and burning corrals will have their hooves burnt off,
And everyone will participate in the tragedy.
The chaparral is more powerful than we,
The seed bank waits patiently.

VIII

The giant black rattlesnake
Bit the rich man's horse
In protection of its habitat
And was killed as just another pest
Not considered for it's worth
As the guardian of the brush.



Dr. Williams is a professional botanist in California. Some time ago he was involved as an advisor during a vegetation "clearance" project. The destruction he witnessed inspired this poem. He no longer associates himself with such projects.