THE LANDSCAPING IDEAS OF JAYS

Judith Larner Lowry, in “The Landscaping Ideas of Jays: A Natural History of the Backyard Restoration Garden” (280pp., U. of California Press, 2007) dreams of creating, out of age-old materials and ideas, a new California.“As I drive and walk through California, I mentally relandscape the world and hardly know that I’m doing it.” She envisions “a new arrangement that encompasses but is not overwhelmed by realities of house, car, and human population.” In imagination she restores drainages, creates native prairies and sees wildflower lawns which join to form “the miles-long sweeps of annual spring wildflower bloom so remarked on by early California observers.”

Lowry knows native plants and their associated creatures are in deep trouble, as “restoration” implies, but focuses instead on praise and teaching. Owner of a native plant seed nursery near Pt. Reyes and caretaker of a forest tract on the Pacific west slope, she spends her time gathering, cleaning and packaging seeds, paying attention to “coarse woody debris” and, above all, imagining “the return of local (plant) species to territory once held by them.” She wants to tell “the richest, most evocative story, the tale of the *backyard restoration gardener*.”

She draws ideas above all from Native Californians, wild creatures, and her predecessors. She notes that California’s rich diversity, especially of forbs and grasses, largely disappeared between the late nineteenth and middle twentieth centuries, and envisions a recreation of “what the land might have been like once, when managed by California’s indigenous peoples.” They knew that “You

must use (plants) so they will come up again." They celebrated the return every spring of vast tracts of wildflowers, even dressing young girls to imitate them. They "regarded (trails) as conscious beings with power to confer blessings if treated properly." "Our maintenance activities," she says, "can resemble in many cases the practices of the indigenous people who cared for the land before us." As she tells new interns, "`You are fire, you are flood.'"

She tells the stories of three California native plant pioneers. Of Lester Rowntree she says, "As much as anyone could, she lived California." Edith Van Allen Murphey "had direct and continuous contact with indigenous peoples," and Gerda Isenburg's influence is like "the rock cast into the pond whose ripples go on and on."

But more than all these, Lowry acknowledges the help of wild creatures. "When land management decisions need to be made, I frequently check with the quail," who "stitch the neighborhoods together." Since "the western scrub jay is significantly responsible for our oak-and pine-studded hillsides," she lets plants in her yard grow wherever they've planted seeds: hence "the landscaping ideas of jays." Deer browsing postpones bloom time, thus creating sequential bloom, a delight for humans and a necessity for birds and bees. Quail, working the ground like miniature cattle, prepare it for seed sowing.

Perhaps her greatest gift, Lowry teaches us to see with new eyes. She speaks of leaf litter "to be treasured and hoarded," of the "decay drama" that follows a tree falling, of bears "feeding" salmon carcasses to forests. There are no pests in her garden: "a strange insect is just a friend you

haven’t met yet.” And whereas we now have wheat and a few other grains, native Californians had a much healthier diet, “the seed of dozens of wildflowers, as well as shrubs and trees, which provided complex carbohydrates, proteins, high quality oil, and fiber.”

Finally, the new California gardens she sees emerging will function “as pleasurable landscapes, as significant food sources, and as restored habitat.”