CHERYL CALLERI

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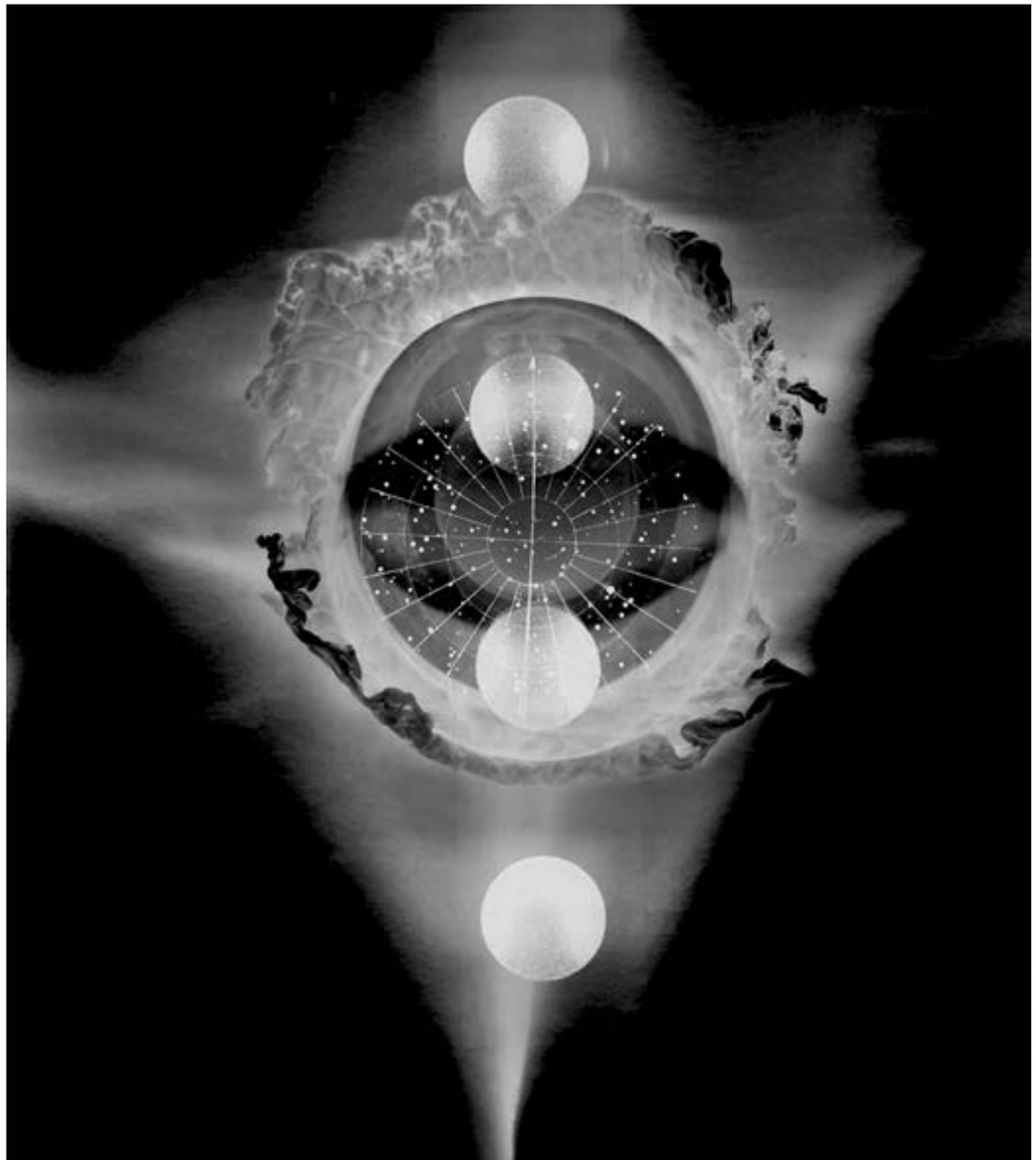
Pigment print, 5 x 5 3/4 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHARLES HOOD

Champion Trees

Secret Nature and the Meaning of Life

We all know how to spot bird-watchers: they wear the "uniform"—khaki trousers, wide-brimmed hats, and nerdy shoulder bags to hold their field guides and water bottles and pocket notebooks, notebooks that document such esoteric experiences as the fact that at "0640, 2 GBHE were feeding, main pond. 4 RUDU in alt plum. Many RWBB." (The bird-banding codes denote great blue herons, ruddy ducks, and red-winged blackbirds.) They have binoculars too of course—Swarovski, Zeiss, Nikon, Bausch and Lomb—thousands of dollars of premium optics hanging from weary necks like black, overpriced bricks. Bird-watchers must be dedicated indeed to schlep it all around.

Turns out, they are not alone. Equally devoted are the herp people (snakes and lizards), and also the dragonfly spotters, mushroom hunters, cactus listers, and cloud fanciers. (Yes, there are new "species" of clouds still being catalogued and named.) California recently adopted its first official state lichen, thanks to determined lobbying by those for whom lichens matter (and matter a lot). Name any taxonomic unit and it will have a devoted tribe busy seeking out the rarest or biggest or queerest item of all, then when they find it, everybody will high-five and dance the happy dance.

By extension trees are going to have their tree people—folks who seek out, celebrate, want to be photographed standing next to trees, and not just any kind of tree, but champion trees. What's a champion? Basically, the all-time biggest one, since if there is such a tree as the snot apple (*Azanza garckeana*), then inevitably somebody will want to find the biggest snot apple of all.

These are treasures hiding in plain sight. According to a forestry website, California has 207 big-tree listings, 126 national champions, and 37 cochampions. It's a points thing, like trophy antlers on a moose. The winning tree does not have to be deep in a forest; overwatered city parks make prime foraging grounds for an alert tree spotter. Maybe you have a champion in your local patch, don't even know it yet. To check, borrow a surveyor's measure. Here's the formula: Trunk Circumference (inches) + Height (feet) + ¼ Average Crown Spread (feet) = Total Points. To get circumference (or "dbh," diameter at breast height), you measure the trunk four-and-a-half feet up from the ground, unless there is a branch or the tree is on a hill. You can do

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it with some old rope and a measuring tape, but hard-core aficionados buy laser hypsometers for $400 each. (As my old climbing partner used to say, "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing.")

Do trees (like dogs) mirror the personalities of their owners? How perfect that one of the national champions in Los Angeles is the flower fence tree, and another, the silk floss, shades the grounds of the Hotel Bel-Air. There is a champion bottle tree near Las Vegas, in Boulder City. That suggests that record-holding trees may be closer to all of us than we might think. And that is indeed true: checking the database reveals that Santa Cruz has a champion California buckeye, Point Lobos a champion Gowen cypress, and even lowly Visalia wins with a supersized digger or ghost pine, also called gray pine, a tree whose dense, spiky cones remind me of an armor-plated coconut.

What do these trees mean? Why are we so compelled to measure, rank, award names and badges? "He has seen the elephant," Thoreau said sarcastically after Emerson returned from a year in Europe. For Thoreau, the local was miraculous enough; seeking superlatives meant overlooking the glory of the everyday. Most everybody else disagrees and wants to be part of some kind of ultimate experience, and people are eager to hear about the biggest whale, fastest car, most obese cat. The Internet makes notoriety and status ever easier to access. Yet as movie stars warn us, one should be wary of fame. It can be a dark force. The village of Stratford-upon-Avon once had a tree planted by Shakespeare (well, supposedly planted by him), but it no longer grows there, having been cut down in the eighteenth century by the property owner who was tired of all these strangers coming to his yard to carve names or break off memorial branches. The tree was looking worse and worse and the strangers in his yard were bolder and bolder, so finally the owner just cut the tree down and turned it into firewood. "Enough already!"

Being the biggest or fanciest or most well-known of anything means taking a great risk. Don't we think that somehow nature should be pure, exempted from this? And yet the best things in nature bring out the worst part of people. Sad but true: Not all champion trees can be made public. For example, the tallest coastal redwood in the world—the all-time highest, most colossal skyscraper champion redwood tree in the entire world—is . . .

. . . a secret. Those who know about this tree won't reveal where it is, since if they say exactly where it lives, somebody will want to light it on fire or hook a chain around it and try to pull it down with a pickup truck or trample the roots taking selfies or mar the trunk with tagged names and blowtorched swastikas. When it comes to nature, superlatives like biggest, tallest, oldest bring out awe in most folks but provoke rage in others. Sworn to secrecy, I have hiked to what was claimed to be the second-tallest coastal redwood (which still seemed pretty damn tall), but that hardly counts, does it? Second best doesn't feel quite complete. I am part of the problem too, then; I still want to get somebody to slip me the GPS numbers to get to the actual champion itself. The oldest bristlecone pine, over five thousand years old—sorry, but that one has to be a secret too, as are the runners-up for eldest of all. Hidden from general knowledge, it's as if those ancient trees have been whisked into witness protection or somehow have to be ashamed of their Methuselah status.

Another at-risk champion is King Clone Creosote, a single plant that has been growing in a gradually enlarging circle for 11,700 years. It lives inside a low fence along a dirt road in an otherwise anonymous desert north of Joshua Tree. I have gone there—directions can be hunted up on the Internet—but really, it would be better if somebody cast a memory charm and deleted those from our collective awareness, maybe even took down the fence, and let it go on being just an anonymous creosote bush and not a site that needs to worry about collectors, ravers, vandals, and off-roaders.

Even bird-watchers can cause harm, and I have seen bushes trampled flat by people chasing a rare bird. ("Rare" is any bird a given person has not yet seen and wants to add to her or his list.) It's even worse in England—more people, less open space—and so according to the *Washington Post*, "Local police were forced to cordon off streets after hundreds of desperate bird-watchers descended on a suburban home in Hampshire when a rare Spanish sparrow fluttered into somebody's garden." There are more species of American owls than one might guess (fourteen species in California alone), and many are dinky and hard to find. When the sparrow-sized elf owl nested this past spring at Joshua Tree National Park, birders and photographers would have been equally desperate to see it. It is a streaky brown job with big yellow eyes like the face of a lemur. This is the world's smallest owl and only a dozen pairs nest in California, mostly along the Colorado River in woodpecker holes in saguaro cactus. A known pair closer to Los Angeles would be a very, very attractive target. People would drive for days and, once on site, play recordings of owl calls and wander around with spotlights until the birds dropped dead from exhaustion.

Fearing for both the safety of the owls and the owls' trees, the National Park Service insisted on a total news blackout. It worked; during breeding season, no whisper of the owls' location leaked out, and even afterwards, the now-empty trees grow in what the CIA would call "an undisclosed location." In reviewing common words, the poet J. D. McClatchy reminds us that to list once meant not just to document or itemize but to love and desire. That last pair causes the problem: love and desire go together about as well as fireworks and plutonium.

As just one example, as condors declined at the end of the nineteenth century, collectors coveted all parts of the beast, from pelt to hatchlings. A dozen condor eggs went for $18,000—and that was in 1890 dollars. Picture now a huge oak tree, a real granddaddy of them all. The trunk is thick, gnarled, layered with character; the immense branches spread out like a tent over a wedding. How much this grand tree has seen and endured, and each year it has survived to carry on for another year, another century. It might be hundreds of years old, perhaps even a thousand. In that span it has endured lightning strike after lightning strike, drought after drought. It was probed by bark beetles, scarred by gall wasps, undermined by fungus. Yet the worst danger of all might come if somebody names it a champion and puts up a big sign. Wood would be carved, acorns stolen, soil compacted, fires lit. To get the perfect shot, here, wait, just trim this part of the branch back a bit. It would be dead in ten years.

We all know the perils of fame. Bill Murray says that whenever anybody tells him they want to be rich and famous, he recommends starting with just the rich part and seeing if that doesn't take care of it.

Let Bill Murray and the champion trees guide us: The secret to a happy, contented life is to live to be very old, very tough, and very anonymous.

Charles Hood is the author of *A Californian's Guide to the Birds Among Us* from Heyday Books. When he was growing up in L.A., his favorite plant was the itchy bomb tree, which he and the other kids would put down each others' backs. Now he just likes looking at them, and he can identify every tree in his neighborhood, even the boring ones.