

The Final Word

by Erica Ryberg



Western Growth Puts the Squeeze on Mountain Lions — and Activists

On July 24, a federal judge will sentence Earth Firsters Rod Coronado and Matt Crozier in what some activists are calling a “green scare,” modeled on the “red scare” of the 1950s. Both men have felony and misdemeanor convictions for tampering with Arizona Game and Fish-set mountain lion traps in Sabino Canyon, a popular attraction at the edge of Tucson, Arizona. The men were trying to protect five lions that had been stalking hikers and schoolchildren, but by the day of their conviction, four of the lions were dead and one confined to a refuge where she would spend the rest of her life.

It was clear that both sides had done what they believed was right.

Last December, during Matt and Rod’s trial, the green scare came home. I knew of their predicament from my dear friend Bill Rodgers, who died on December 22, 2005. Bill was an activist who devoted his life to protecting animals and the environment, and while I considered his opinions in most cases to be golden, I disagreed with his advocacy of these particular fearless lions. As it turned out, I never got a chance to discuss our differences before he was captured and charged with arson. According to the FBI, Bill and a half-dozen other people operating as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) burned buildings and horse corrals across the West between 1997 and 2001.

At Bill’s December 15 detention hearing, Special Agent Doug Litner argued against his release, claiming that an FBI informant and Bill’s own recorded conversations tied him not only to the single arson he was charged with, but to five additional arsons, including one at a Vail, Colo., ski resort in 1998, as well as arsons in the planning.

Sitting in the press section of the courtroom, I tallied the property loss and realized that, according to the government, Bill and Co. had dealt \$20 million in damage to interests that had crossed theirs.

I hoped to God he had actually done it, that if he was going to spend the rest of his life in prison he had gotten something out of it.

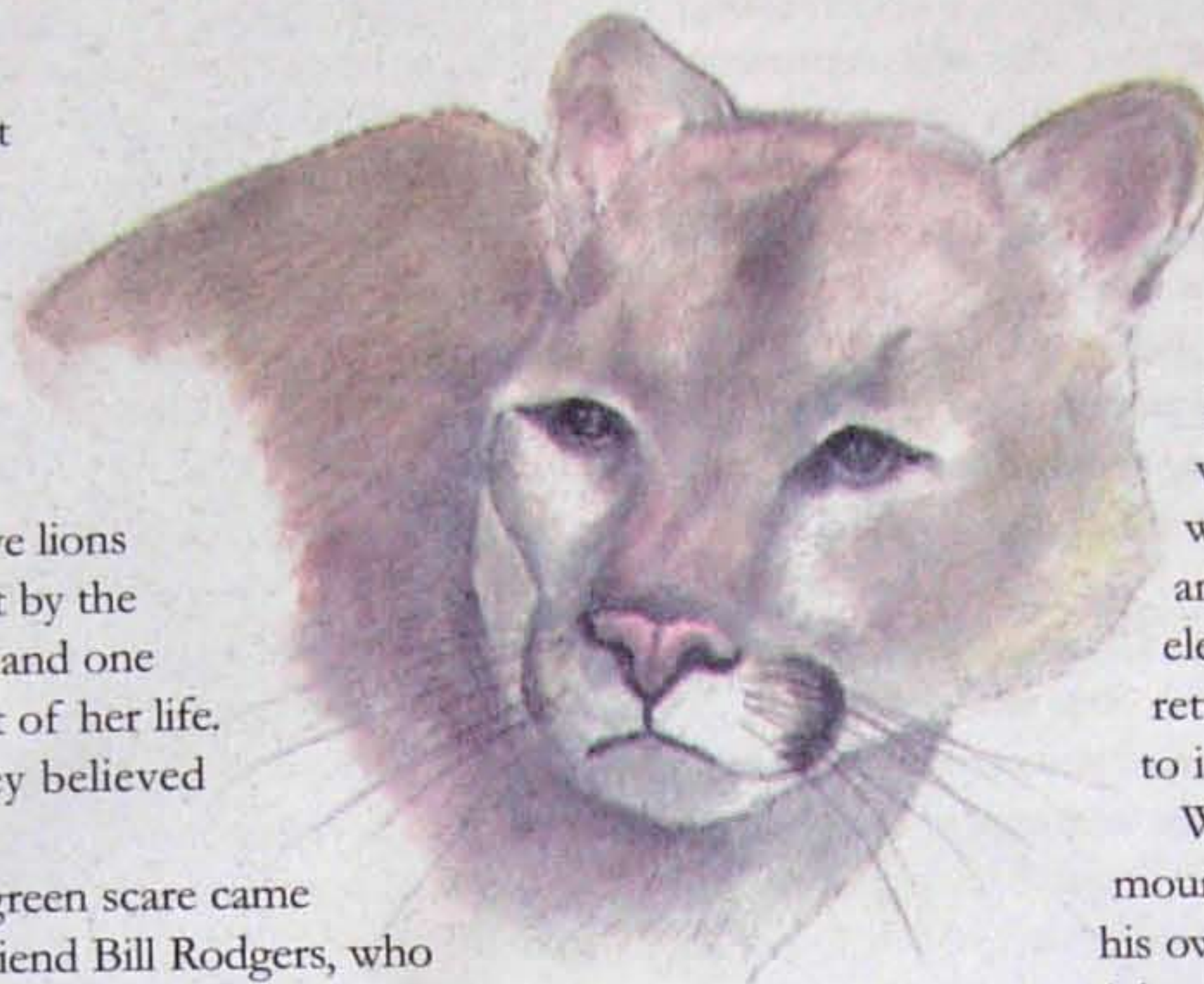
At the end of the hearing, Bill took a long sweeping glance around the courtroom. Angie Ruth, a scrappy 50-something peace activist from Great Britain, gave him an effusive “We’re here for you Bill” wink and thumbs up. I just smiled at him, but I was wearing red and black — anarchist colors — and hoping he’d get the point. I still have a lot to learn from Angie.

Denied bail, my friend, the dedicated spelunker who loved dark and wild places, remained in his cell, bathed night and day in electrical light, breathing recycled air. For someone who thought houses were a bad invention, this was certainly a terrible blow. In point of fact, the will that jailers later found in his cell bore the date of the detention hearing.

Bill killed himself far sooner than any of us would have guessed. Only two weeks after his capture, on the Winter solstice — the darkest night of the year — he put a plastic bag over his head and freed himself. The letters he left confirmed the notion of jailbreak. “I have dedicated my life to doing good,” one read. “I shall not be imprisoned, while my captors continue to pillage the Earth. I choose to set myself free.”

We gathered to remember him the evening after the jail reported his death. George Seaman, one of Prescott’s grizzled and irreverent activists, pointed out that Bill was a warrior who had met a warrior’s end. I thought so too, and tried not to mourn too much. That was Bill’s parting directive, after all: “Don’t mourn, organize!”

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As commercial interests and a burgeoning population intersect with the Wild West, warriors like Bill, Rod and Matt have become more and more willing to fight by any means necessary. It helps me to remember there are many ways to make a difference. We have folks working with those commercial interests, like the Arizona Wilderness Coalition, which has helped designate over two million acres of wilderness in our state. For that matter, during 2004 and 2005, Arizona Game and Fish worked with a local electric utility to dismantle a hydroelectric plant and return a well-loved canyon creek near Camp Verde back to its wild state.

We aren’t all warriors like Bill. But Bill, like the Sabino mountain lions who had lost their fear of humans, had lost his own fear of a broken system and done what he knew was right. And Bill, like the lions, was never meant to be confined.

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