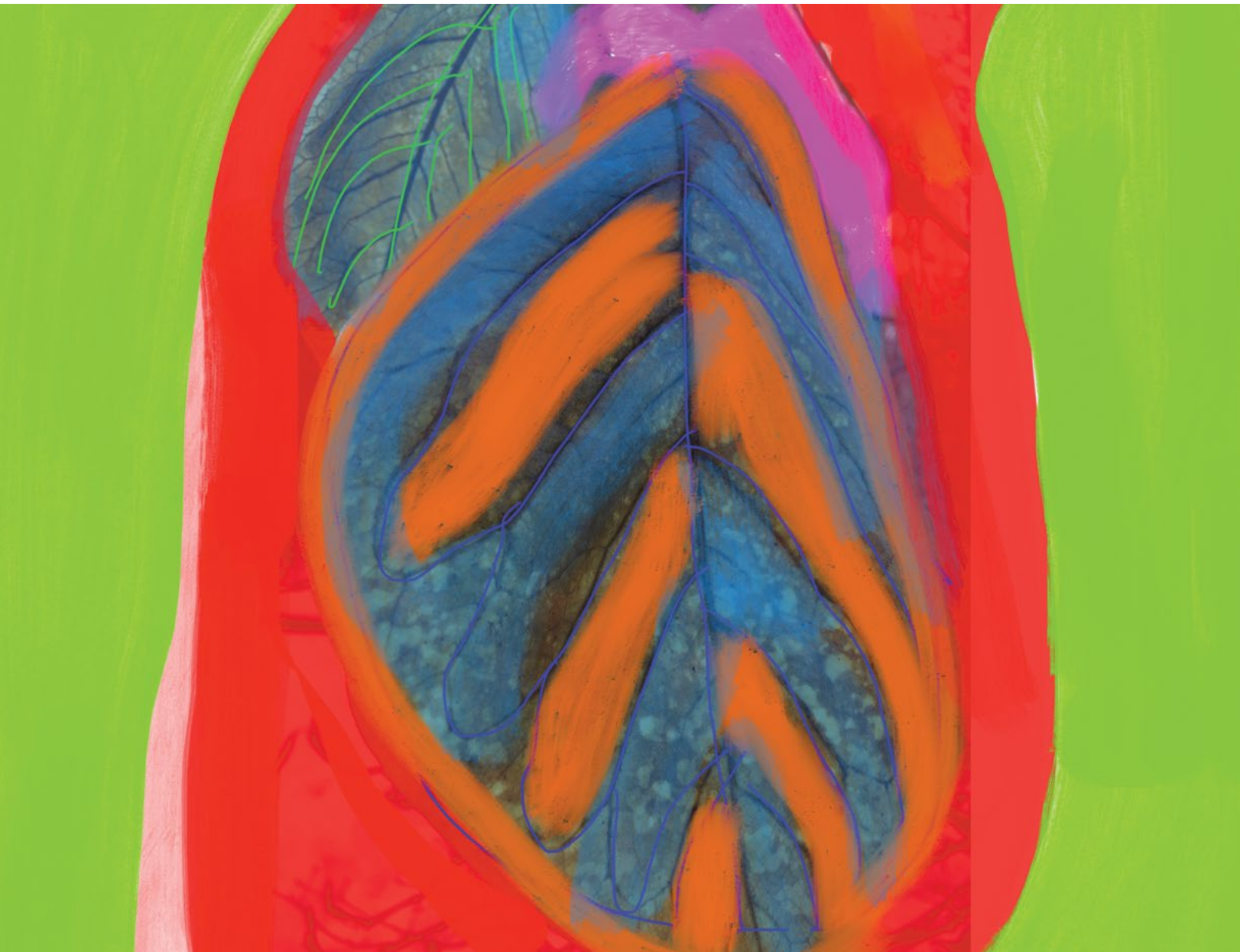


KATHLEEN FORSYTHE

New Life, 2017
Digital on aluminum, 20 x 16 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ANDREW SCHELLING

Ethnobotanist and The People With Bones

A Tribute to Dale Pendell,
1947-2018

A man walks into a bar. His chestnut-colored hair is secured in a bun with a long wooden pin. He turns to a table, draws a red bandana from his pocket, and spreads it out. He arranges five whitish-blue mushrooms, slightly bruised, from smallest to largest on the red cloth. After a few moments he looks at his friend. “What do you see with these mushrooms?” His friend studies them. “They look like the same species.” The friend looks up. “You’ve arranged them smallest to largest. Maybe youngest to oldest.” The first man lifts three with a deft motion. “These,” he says wickedly, “are delicious. The other two,” he pauses, “will kill you. It will be a slow death. They will bore holes in your liver. It will take two weeks. There is no antidote.”

* * *

I met Dale Pendell in 1977 at a primitive arts festival he helped organize in Jackson Meadow in the Sierra Nevada foothills, after a bright poster caught my eye in Berkeley. At Jackson Meadow, he taught a workshop on poetry by a fire ring. At some point he asked for a poem of mine. I read one. “A lot of poems these days with the polestar,” he said drily. That was all I needed; about the most helpful poetry instruction anyone ever gave me. Dale was living on the San Juan Ridge with his family in those days. Like many of the folk up on the ridge—along the South Fork of the Yuba River—he did a bit of manual labor, wrote poetry, worked on restoring land that had been badly damaged by hydraulic mining in the nineteenth century, and sat zazen. Dale had trained himself as a botanist. Already he was making collections and doing experiments nobody else had thought of. He’d gone up the Mad River looking for a plant ally, got directions from an elderly Indian woman, and found the wrong plant. It became his ally though. Back of the shack in the mountain meadows where he lived with his family (he’d built it out of an old chicken coop), he had a metallic trailer with several windows. This was his laboratory and his study: plant specimens, plant presses, a thermos, radio, typewriter, and books.

When Dale’s time on the ridge came to an end, he decided to return to college. Some divination pointed him to UC Santa Cruz. Those days I lived in the mountains outside Santa Cruz in a steep valley bristling with redwoods. There was a cabin on the property with a rare albino redwood near