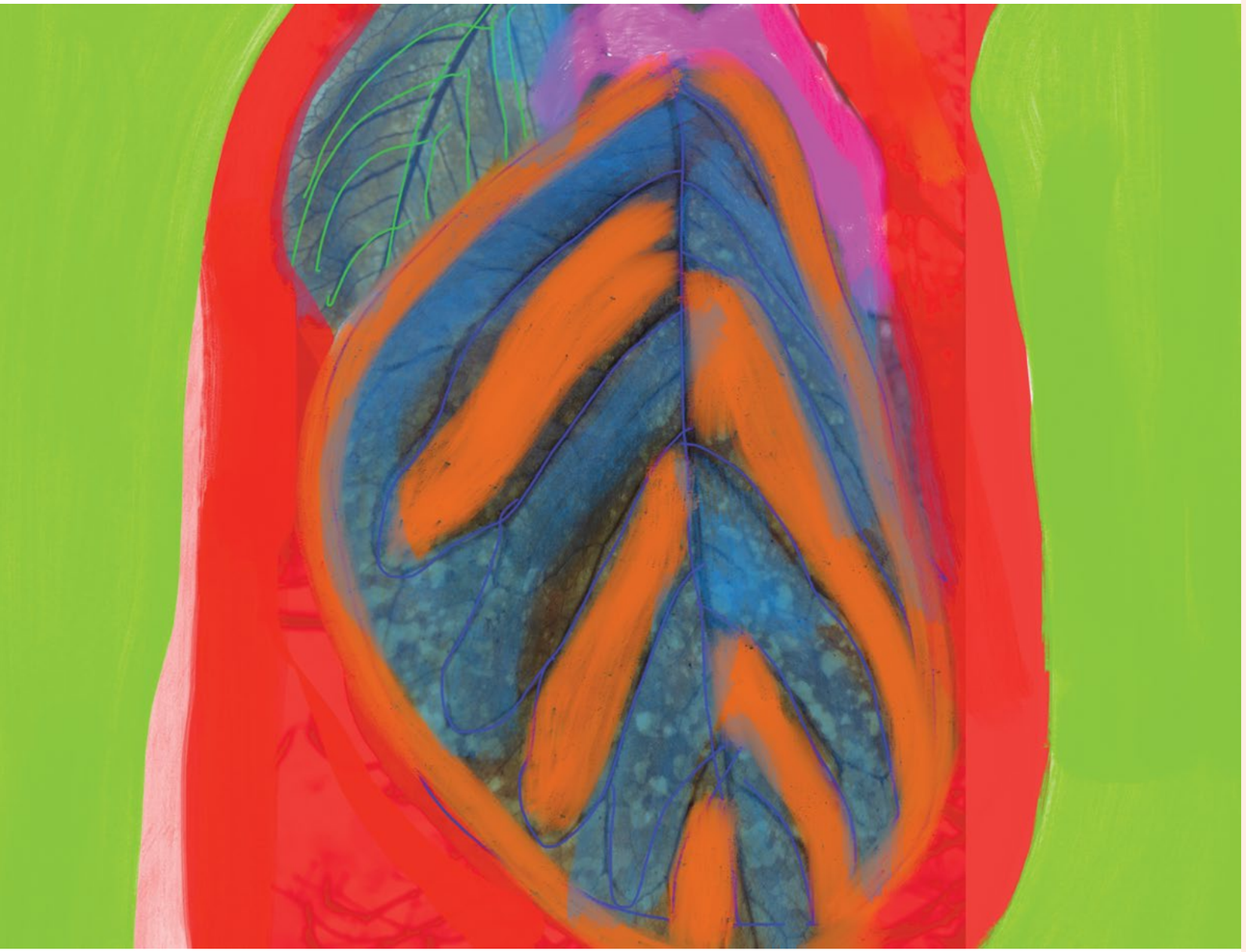
## KATHLEEN FORSYTHE

*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

its door. We offered the cabin to Dale. He spent about a year in it, before he moved his family down from the ridge, into the house on Myrtle Street where Marici still lives.

When he was resident in that wood-plank cabin back in the trees, he'd come late from town in the evening, often with some sort of tincture to share with Kristina and me. Sitting by an oil lamp or woodstove, listening to winter rain pour loudly through the woods, we learned about Chartreuse. The sweet herbaceous yellow infusion that softens your tongue, or the fiery green that bites the back of your throat. Dale taught us B & B—Bénédictine and brandy. And Frangelico, compounded from hazelnuts. Potions distilled by herb-specialist monks far off in France or Italy. Sometimes he brought a flat basket of mushrooms he'd harvested.

How much this man, five years older than me, seemed to know! He was a poet. He had produced a fine book of poems and images, *The Gold Dust Wilderness*—the designs modeled on California Indian rock art—silk-screened and hand-bound with marbled paper and leather. He edited *Kuksu*, the first bioregional poetry journal. We didn't call it that in those days, but people had just begun to identify the term *bioregion*. Dale studied mushrooms, ethnography, where to find rock art. Herbs and flowers he knew; he even had a laboratory with beakers, retorts, burners, microscopes, slides. And file cabinets full of plant specimens from his flower press. He owned a library of poetry. He read mathematics, astronomy, ethnobotany. He'd been to prison. He played chess and read calculus.

At the university, Dale developed a curious, contentious, and I think enormously fruitful relationship with a professor of classics, Norman O. Brown, whom everyone called Nobby. Nobby had started out as a Marxist scholar of Greek mythology. He studied the Western tradition of visionary outsiders and prophets, from Hesiod to Teilhard de Chardin. He wrote a book, *Love's Body*, built on aphorisms, puzzles, formulas, a mosaic of everybody from the Greek pre-Socratics to Emily Dickinson, with William Blake, Freud, Laozi, and the Christian mystics taking part in a grand bricolage. The book made him a counterculture hero because it called for a liberation of the body through poetry. It was a shaman's book. Nobby was a shaman of the library. But a shaman in a 1960s world that wanted gurus. Nobby had no interest in gurus. He fled from anyone who came hoping for spiritual counsel. Worse, if you tried to impress him with something you'd learned or thought up, he'd cut you where you stood.

How did Dale get close to this loner intellectual medicine man? I can only assume it was Dale's eye for mischief—a kind of archetypal mischief that would slyly pierce a conversation, leaving it in fragments and riddles. Sometimes the glint that came into his eye made me think I had a real coyote in front of me. After Nobby's death in 1993, Dale wrote a book of dialogues between himself and Nobby, *Walking with Nobby*. You can see the sparring, jousting, wit, competition, and razor-sharp humor forging a wary friendship. It is a terrific book. But it's Nobby's method of writing I want to talk about.

I think Dale got right away how important Nobby's aphoristic style could be. A form "so perishable," Nobby said, "that it cannot be hoarded by any elite or stored in any institution." Few of us believed in institutions in those days. They lacked the wildly dissident voices we wanted to hear. We hated poetry institutions, we hated political institutions, as much as we disliked banks—all of them housing such narrow views. Dale took to the use of many voices, many, many voices, as Nobby had, and did something unique with them. He set them in a kind of contrapuntal, contentious dialogue—not the thunder, brimstone, and prophetic tones of Nobby, which Dale would have disfavored (his father was pastor of a megachurch in Southern California). The voices in Dale's writings, from this point forward, were quietly wicked, fiercely partisan, trouble and mischief; they laughed, barked, contradicted each other, mocked, insulted, goaded, and instructed.

One day he said, "I've got a book I wrote. Want to read the manuscript?" This was the first volume of his *Pharmako* trilogy, *Pharmako/Poeia*. I took the manuscript home, got tangled up in its pages, and for the first time in my life felt a burst of pride at what a friend had accomplished. "The book is fantastic," I told Dale. "A real contribution." Its pungent brevity, the verbal deftness, the circular architecture, the feeling you are inside an alchemist's retort. The wry mischief it's salted with. The voices, the people, animals, minerals, heavenly bodies, scholars, medicine-singers, and of course, plants . . . plants . . . plants.

However—I said, "You need to document all the sources. So much ethnography, chemistry, poetry, divination, botany. Scholarly voices, wise voices! Who is going to know where it all comes from? You need to document this stuff if you want anyone to take it seriously."

Then I saw the glint of coyote mischief in his eye.

When the book came out, he had not documented anything. But it did get taken seriously. Recently I heard that an introduction to psychology course at Berkeley assigns it. It is required reading for 650 undergraduates. I was wrong.

Dale was right.

*Pharmako/Poeia* is a great projective poem full of echoes, presences, and archetypal lore. After that first volume came two more: *Pharmako/Gnosis* and *Pharmako/Dynamis*. In the trilogy he invents a system of mind-and-plant-ally classification that people will study for centuries. I once told a small group of people that it reminds me of the Wordsworth adage: "Create a system, or be enslaved by another man's." "Not Wordsworth," Dale corrected. "That's William Blake."

Once I moved from California to Colorado, I saw less of Dale. Whenever I could, though, I'd visit him and Laura, first in Oakland, then at their Mantis Hill ranchstead in Penn Valley. He gave me bottles of his home-brewed absinthe, with Greek letters on the labels to throw federal agents off the scent. We sent each other postcards and books. He made me a beaded bracelet—his own design, which he called "poison path."

When he got liver cancer and needed a transplant, we spoke all the time by phone. When cancer returned last year in his spine, we were able to visit on a few occasions, when I made it out west. But small lesions began to reduce the bone in his spine—first weakness with little twinges, then terrible pain. I saw him take a dropper of morphine to a little glass in a restaurant in Berkeley; it reminded me of the nights of green Chartreuse, but with a grimmer edge. He phoned one day and asked, "Where is that story about the 'people with bones'?"

People with bones. It is a story I got from Jaime de Angulo. In a letter de Angulo wrote Franz Boas in 1933, he calls it a Shasta story. On the *Old Time Stories* KPFA radio broadcasts, he had Antelope Woman tell it: a Paiute tale. It shows up in several of his linguistic studies.

A man loves his woman dearly. She dies and he follows her spirit to the edge of the ocean, even though she keeps turning around and telling him to go back home. One day after running up and down the seashore, she dives into a wave and disappears. He pursues her, diving into the next wave. Under the sea is a tunnel, and he follows it to the land of the dead. When he gets there, he stands behind a tree and studies the people, until they all file into a pit house, including his woman. How can so many people fit into that house, he wonders. He goes into the house and there is nobody there. Except way in the back, on the other side of the fire, a figure lying on the ground in the dark. It is Coyote Old Man. Coyote says to him: "You shouldn't have come. I don't know how you got here. Nobody with bones gets here. The people are all afraid of you, because you have bones."

Dale began to identify with those people. He told me he was having a hard time relating to people with bones. Not easy to be around them. They have different ways to them. The deterioration of his spine—most fundamental of bone structures— must have made Dale feel he was one of the people without, like the dead in the Shasta story. When de Angulo wrote that letter to Boas, he was recovering from a shattered pelvis, broken shoulder, and crushed ribs. A car had plunged into Torre Canyon at Big Sur, killing his son and wrecking his own body. He seemed to have no bones either, those years . . .

His whole life, Dale was a master of puzzling little aphorisms. When he spoke them there was a mix of Lao Tzu, Kuan Yin, Hermes the thief, Spinoza, Emily Dickinson . . . A hundred or a thousand times, sitting by a flame, by the woodstove, at the dinner table, out of some silence he would lift his head, stare you in the eye, and pronounce something that sounded old and formulaic. Archaic, cryptic: little gnomic puzzle riddle sayings. I'd lean my head forward and try to study out what it meant. Then there it would be. That twitch of a smile. Like an old coyote.

This New Year's I stayed several days with Dale and Laura at Mantis Hill. The oaks were green and the grasses. Dale spoke of the Chinese, shooting off fireworks at New Year's to drive evil spirits away. Old karma, bad things; however you want to say it. Mostly Dale would sit quiet or sleep on the couch. Once in a while he'd make one of those remarks, a formula, a little puzzle. Maybe a math problem. "Andrew told you: Six, Seven, Eight."

He no longer glinted with mischief. His eyes were huge with a scary wild astonishment—like he had gone to land

of the dead and could not figure what to do with what was left of his bones. I began to wish I had written down the hundreds of puzzles or riddles or aphorisms I'd heard over the forty years we had been friends. They'd make a tough old poem, built out of small steps, like Wittgenstein, or a Zen handbook. One night I jotted a few things he said into a notebook—

there's a corpse to float
how do they make the code reported
Howard said he never knew who put the acid in
we gotta let them mice run a long way
don't get airborne
getting complicated reminds me of brothers

That last day, I kissed his wild head when departing. His hair smelled like meadow grass. He was very thin. A couple of weeks later, Laura sent a card with something Dale had dictated on January 11th. He'd asked her to send it to me. I separated it out into lines, like a little song. I see what it is: a ghost dance song.

I'm glad this
shitty thing
didn't stretch out past
twilight

jesus christ

if we can
still help each other
and I think we can
let's

## Editor's note

Dale Pendell was a regular contributor to *Catamaran* since its inaugural issue in Fall 2012. For that issue he contributed an essay, "Solitary." Despite his solitary nature, Dale was the best company a person could have: generous, kind, thoughtful, and creative. The breadth of his interests is reflected in his work that was published in *Catamaran*. "Solitary" is a personal memoir that describes his coming of age in prison. Winter 2014 saw "Broken Symmetry," his reflections on John Piper's windows for the baptistery of St. Michael's cathedral in Coventry. "Holes in the Ground," which appeared in the Spring 2016 issue, was a catalogue of creatures living in the soil of his home in the Sierra foothills. In Spring 2017 he continued his exploration of that region with "Tracing the Pluton," an investigation of its geology. Maybe Dale wasn't so much solitary as unique. He created a unique personal style that effortlessly combined poetics, historicism, and scientific exploration. There will not be another like him.

—Thomas Christensen, Contributing Editor

**Andrew Schelling** has published twenty books, most recently *Tracks Along the Left Coast: Jaime de Angulo & Pacific Coast Culture*, a folkloric account of West Coast ethnography, linguistics, bohemian poets, and California Indian lore. Forthcoming in November is *Some Unquenchable Desire: Poems of the Buddhist Hermit Bhartrihari*. Schelling lives in the Southern Rocky Mountains of Colorado and teaches at Naropa University.



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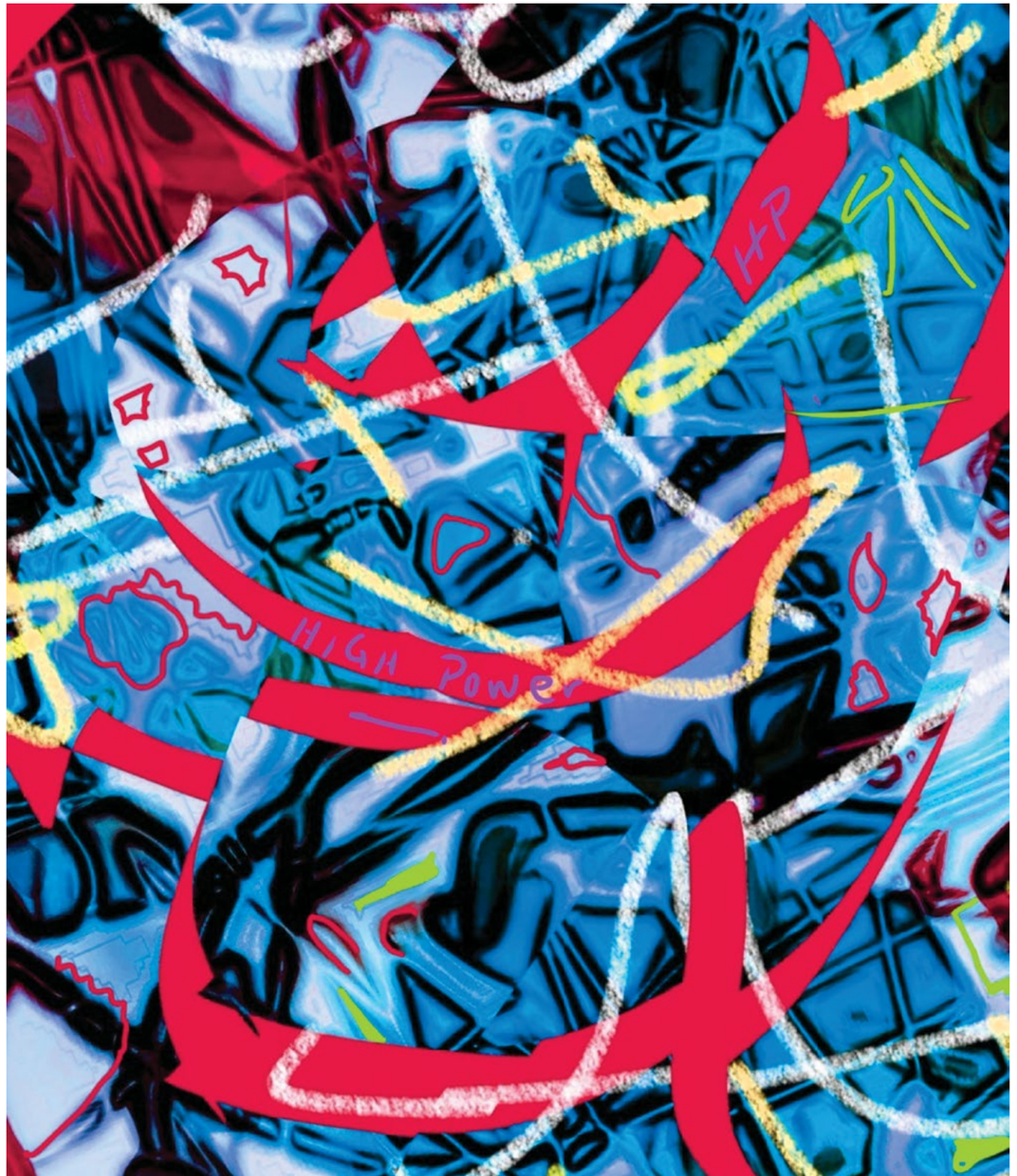
*High Power Graffiti*, 2016
Digital on aluminum, 16 x 18 in

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