

Fertile Dust

I have been trying to meditate and it is not going well. I do this every year or so, with middling results. The internet tells me it's easy! I can apparently do it on the bus, for five minutes, and improve my mental health. But I can't do it on the bus. I'm writing this essay in my head and all the cute dogs are out. And if I quiet my thoughts, I'm not quite sure where I'll go.

In Jay Dart's imagined inner world of Yawnder, and its deeper, more interior, and vaster Beyawnder, great clouds of colour drift, their dust obscuring the landscape. It engulfs his characters in fog, strands them on hilltops, leaves them lonely by veiling them from each other. Contemplation slows your thoughts, but it doesn't stop them. They float along, growing and dispersing, taking root or clouding your mind. An old field grows thick with wind-blown vegetation; it also grows a dirt pile that gradually becomes a hill, dump trucks trundling down the road at all hours filled with the basements of a new subdivision, dust swirling up on a spring breeze.

Dart's art has roamed the pathless landscapes of Yawnder for more than a dozen years. His avatar, the intrepid Jiggs, and Jiggs' loyal dog, Floyd, have faced uncertainty and competition, snatched technicolour geists from the sky and grown them into geistwood trees, learning to wait patiently for inspiration to gain in thickness and heft. They have encountered Foredads and Foremoms, fellers and deliverers and drivers, and spent many an evening at the Tavern of Delights.

Yawnder began as a place to puzzle out the strangeness of being an artist, the perplexing process of making and shaping ideas. A mystery equally potent for the friends and family of such an individual as for the artist themselves. What is an idea, anyway? "A long time ago," Dart told me, "my kids—it was just as a joke—they would ask me, 'Where do you yawns go?' And I said, 'Oh, it's the clouds, the clouds are yawns'—this thing that just goes out, and our breath as well, and how it's just all around us all the time."¹ It's as good an explanation as any.

In her essay "On How to Grow an Idea," the American writer and artist Jenny Odell ponders the mystery of ideas and inspiration. "It's easy for me to say that 'I' produce ideas," she writes. "But when I've finished something, it's often hard for me to say how it happened—where it started, what route it took, and why it ended where it did." To explain what she means, she makes a comparison between creative idea making and the work of the Japanese farmer and philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka, who proposed what he called "do-nothing farming" in his book *The One Straw Revolution*, translated into English in 1978. Reacting to both commercial agricultural practices and a blind belief in progress more generally in the rapidly modernizing Japan of the post-World War II period, Fukuoka sought a revolution in his relationship to cultivation—growing fruit and vegetables by doing as little as possible. To Odell, "It doesn't sound quite right to say

¹ All quotes from Jay Dart are from: Jay Dart in discussion with the author, March 2023.

that Fukuoka ‘farmed the land’—it’s more like he collaborated with the land, and through his collaboration, created the conditions for certain types of growth.”²

Jiggs is collaborating with the land, too, trying to get those geistwoods to grow. Dart, meanwhile, uses Yawnder as a contemplation space, a place where he doesn’t have to be an artist, a father, a commuter, a farmer; a person at an art fair trying to figure out exactly what is happening. Instead, he can step back and observe the ideas of these things. He can see if, left to their own devices, they might work together to become something else. Contemplation is a way to get your idea-obsessed brain to collaborate with your life, with the world outside and all the influences and information it pushes in, like the wind that blows over that big pile of dirt and also the field full of flowers.

In the early days of the pandemic, Dart took advantage of his employer’s subscription to a mediation app, the kind of initiative earnestly described by its proponents (and pointedly decried by its critics) as offering “Happier people. Healthier business.”³ There is something both archly cynical and heartbreakingly clumsy about a business, or in this case college administrators, attempting to cure grief and uncertainty and existential fear with a brightly coloured drop-down menu of quiet reflections. What was it expecting its workers to do with their newfound calm, anyway, other than get back to work? Dart, for his part, told me he liked the practice, the way it helped him step back from where he was. He thinks about other planes of existence more and more when he enters Yawnder, about how to go to-and-fro between elsewhere and the world. “Ideas are not products,” Odell reminds us, “as much as corporations would like them to be. Ideas can literally arise out of clouds (if we are looking at them).”⁴

Yawnder has always pulled in the outside world, its bloggers and art fairs, the careful rows of the tree farms that Dart passes on his commute from his home in a hamlet in north Whitby to his Toronto teaching job. But something has shifted in the world of Jiggs in the past few years. The ecological disruptions of the development creeping ever outward into the fields and farms where Dart lives breed dust clouds that drift over Yawnder’s hills; the confinement of a pandemic isolates both the drawer and the drawn in swirls of information. “There’s been a lot of dusts and mist in the work over the last few years as a result of making that connection between ideas and the physical world,” Dart told me. Elsewhere, in his new video *Distance: Existence, 2021*, the visual language of Yawnder becomes a backdrop for a meditation on the land that inspired it, narrated by the people that live there. These voices include Dart’s brother, the latest custodian of the family’s Northumberland County farm, and David Mowat, current Chief of Alderville First Nation. Dart has always called himself a drawist, but this new work, though not strictly autobiographical, offers glimpses of all the other things he is as well—a father, a teacher, a video artist, and a composer; a settler, the son and brother of farmers, and a person whose

² Jenny Odell, “On How to Grow an Idea,” *The Creative Independent*, April 4, 2018, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/essays/jenny-odell-how-to-grow-an-idea/>.

³ “Headspace for Work,” Headspace, accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.headspace.com/work>.

⁴ Odell, “On How to Grow an Idea.”

contemplation goes outwards as well as in. “When you shine the light in a certain direction, you see all the dust that surrounds us all the time and make the connection to the overwhelmingness of information that comes at us,” Dart says. “And it's just there, even though you don't notice it.”

In *Magical Mystery Beards (Library VI)*, a drawing included in his 2016 *Field Guide to Yawnder*, Dart drew a geist typology, naming four rows of technicolor beards: exploration, design, art, love, bravery, fishing. Last year he repeated the exercise, this time cataloguing *Dust Collection Isolation Records*: self-isolation, unprecedented times, extreme measures, contact tracing. For Odell, “ideas, like consciousness itself, are emergent properties, and thinking might be more participation than it is production. If we can accept this view of the mind with humility and awe, we might be amazed at what will grow there.”⁵ Ideas are the ghosts of the world we inhabit, and their meanings are rarely fixed. To the unstable process of making creative work, Yawnder brings a bit of levity, a touch of softness. And Dart, as he stretches the boundaries of his invented world, embracing the dust, pulling in other voices that speak to it too, does his best to keep opening his mind and seeing what might grow.

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⁵ Odell, “On How to Grow an Idea.”