

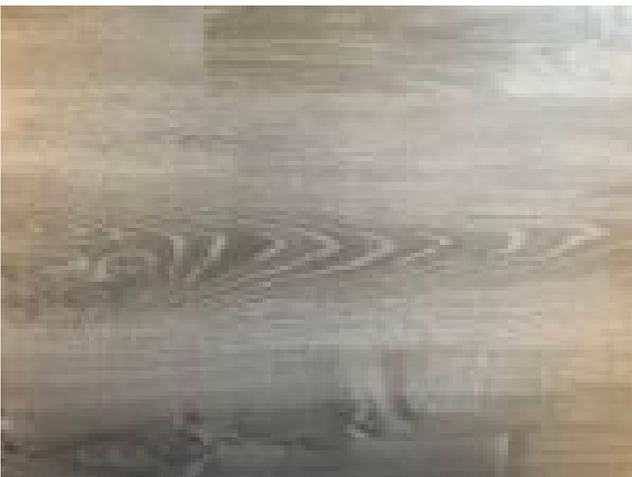
# The Second Thought

written by Will Vincent | May 12, 2020



Image Credit: Chelsea Snow

I push my feet down into the cold linoleum. A machine was programmed to paint the linoleum so it looks sliced from grey wood. It is the hue of a petrified wood's insides, or the planks of a barn on the bluffs near the sea, weathered to the darkest shades of white. According to the search engine, it could be an imitation of the sliced grains and knots of a soft maple. This to say, I am writing about the floor. I am looking out the window. There is a great stream of cars. Its babbling is not the brook's, but a static nuisance—a noise whiting-out The Thought. It is the river that can never complete itself or be stepped into twice safely. It is the disease that has captured our imaginations, jobs, and lives.



The poet, Noah Eli Gordon has been offering lovely 5 minute readings and discussions of poems with his coffee as a way of coping and helping others cope with The Thought. It is also National Poetry Month. So far, he's discussed Marie Ruefle, Joseph Ceravolo, and Aram Saroyan over in little 5 minute Instagram videos. He talks about Saroyan's notorious poem, "lighght." The whole poem is that: "lighght." He talks about how it outraged the National Endowment for the Arts after it appeared in an anthology they

sponsored. The poem draws attention to the silent “gh” by doubling it and invites discussions about the materiality of language, highlighting the difficulties of representation. Gordon talks about how the poem reminds us that each word is a metaphor. Nowhere is it more apparent than in the common names for flora: woolly mule ear, spleenwort, milkvetch. Elsewhere, the metaphoric language in simple idioms can be rendered strange, beautiful, or horrible simply by adding an adjective or offering a more specific noun: *kill two grey birds with one stone, don't count your scrub jays before they're hatched, it is raining jaguars and wolves*. With a simple, nearly randomized gesture of word-replacement, we can estrange ourselves from the cliché and find a poem in the most common language.



The aforementioned Milkvetch. Photo from commons.wikipedia.org.

The cars outside my window are still moving—quarantined by steel, aluminum, titanium; laminated and tempered glass; polypropylene, polyurethane, and PVC dashboards. The more I research what the search engine can tell me about the cars and their component parts, the more the factory that made them reveals itself. I'm reminded of [Craig Dworkin's poem "Fact"](#):

Ink on a 5.5 by 9 inch substrate of 60-pound offset matte white paper. Composed of: varnish (soy

bean oil [C57H98O6], used as a plasticizer: 52%. Phenolic modified rosin resin [Tall oil rosin:

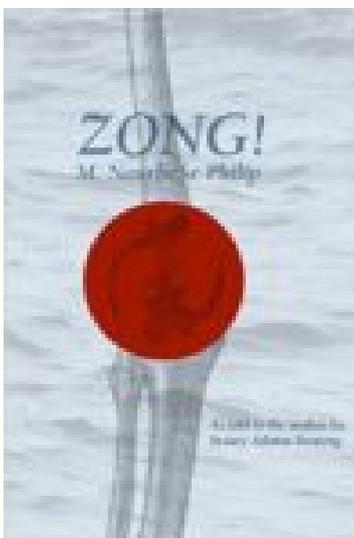
66.2%. Nonylphenol [C15H24O]: 16.6%. Formaldehyde [CH2O]: 4.8%. Maleic anhydride

[C4H2O3]: 2.6%. Glycerol [C3H8O3]: 9.6%. Traces of alkali catalyst: .2%]: 47%): 53.7%. 100S

Type Alkyd used as a binder (Reaction product of linseed oil: 50.7%.

Dworkin goes on with 281 more words about the exact scientific composition of ink on paper. The “poem” invites us to think about the literal substance of a text: the ink and paper. The percentages and chemical compounds connote pollutions and dehumanizing labor that go into printing a poem on paper. It finds its poetry, as so many poems do, by estranging the reader from the commonplace object—the bird, the telephone wire, the window. Dworkin was part of a conceptualist contingency who were actually doing fun, interesting things with poetry, but were largely overshadowed by the racist blunders of Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith, who ended up killing their own poetry movement by taking easy paths towards an art where identity supposedly didn’t matter. There was a time when all we seemed to do in the poetry world was talk about these people. Then, Goldsmith inadvertently mocked Michael Brown’s autopsy by reading it aloud as a “conceptual poem” and Place minstrelized a Twitter stream with quotes from *Gone With the Wind*. Goldsmith was such a machiavellian self-promoter that he even made it on *The Colbert Report* at one point. Apparently, he learned his tricks from the art-world he had, some years prior, abandoned. With the help of an anonymous group called The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringo Poetry and other efforts by poets of color and allies, conceptualism was largely destroyed and forgotten.

But, beyond Goldsmith and Place’s obvious, racist conceptual poetics, there were weirder undercurrents that I still find interesting. Some of Goldsmith’s graduate students made [Troll Thread](#), a Tumblr of conceptual writing PDFs. One of them is the text from the Gameboy game *Pokemon: Yellow* in Helvetica font across 300 some-odd pages. I liked that this art made people angry. It was the best conversation starter in my MFA workshops. We would talk about Goldsmith’s *Weather*, where he transcribed a year of weather reports, word by stuttering word. But, many of the practitioners didn’t think enough about why they were making people angry. In the end, it all ended up being kind of nihilistic and boring. Still, there are some examples of conceptualist works that produced good, productive discussions about history and pain like M. Nourbese Philip’s erasure of legal documents of murdered slaves’ lives for her book *Zong!*. Philip enacts the absences and stutterings that accompany trauma and loss using erasure and the page’s blank white space. She *performs* what others would usually only *describe*.



[Zong!](#) by M Nourbese Philip

Outside my window a sequoia and live oak push up through a bed of spider vines that spill down from our trash-cans toward the roaring 580. The trees are symbols for a great and timeless survival, but even they may die, diseased by some termite or weevil. I move out of the room, away from the notebook. My partner and I eat oatmeal with peanut butter and jam scooped into the center while listening to *The New York Times* podcast. An Italian doctor weeps while talking about his work.

I drink too much coffee and spiral while streaming my lesson for the 8th graders. I promise my students that right now, more than ever, we should only listen to those who are talking about The Thought with clear reasoning and credible sources. Evidence and analysis of evidence—the cold logic of the medical profession and the angry compassion of the masses—may be the things that save us.

On impulse, towards the end of my lesson, I wrangle a few students into a *Dungeons and Dragons* game on the website *Roll20*. This is another wild, reaching compulsive decision toward a creative form of escape that I will surely regret for the tedious work it entails. This is a habit of mine that has been accelerated by The Thought. I whittle wands out of driftwood. I drink whiskey and draw shitty comics about the concerts I went to in high school. It seems like many people are doing this sort of thing: diving into strange hobbies. The anarchists in my Instagram feed are playing *Animal Crossing*. My partner wants to choreograph a dance for Robyn's "Dancing on My Own." My cousin in upstate New York is toying with the idea of streaming his backyard bonfires on *Twitch*.

In one of the state-mandated self-criticisms of the video of myself teaching for the California Teaching Performance Assessment, I have a ghostly reminder of the last few days in my classroom before The Thought filled our lungs and brains. I'm required to watch and analyze the video. I'm supposed to show myself assessing the students in four different ways. In one of the videos, the students debate whether social media makes us more alone, and this triggers an aside about how the parallel thinking revealed by the web can be depressing—that the internet has shown that we are really not all that unique. There are probably people out there very similar to you, thinking the same thing as you, right now. I tell them we can find comfort and community in this fact, or despair in what this means for the creators' helpless pursuit of novelty.

I have no idea what I'm doing when it comes to being a dungeon master. I have only ever run half a Christmas Day campaign for my family that included none of the real technicalities required for combat—rather, it was an opportunity for me to revel in some overwrought, purple prose I had written while amped up on black coffee and mimosas about a frozen world where the spirit of Christmas had been destroyed by the cold hand of technology. In the campaign with my family, intelligent robot elves have banished Santa to a tiki bar on the outskirts of the North Pole. It was our adventurers job to destroy them and restore the spirit of Christmas. My mother played a polar bear and my little brother a talking candy cane named Swinzel.



My parent's table after Christmas D&D

My 8th graders are reluctant to take on the character voices and theatricality that my family displayed, but seem committed and show surprising patience with my sorting through the myriad number systems that govern this game. The students have chosen a dragonborn druid named Barruk who is obsessed with making ice sculptures, an elf druid named Tar Xana from the jungle in search of their kidnapped parents, a dragonborn cleric named Sage, and a gnome wizard banana peddler named Mason.

We begin our campaign huddled around a fire in the middle of Barruk's igloo. The walls are dented with holes where Barruk burps or coughs flames in his sleep. The creatures sip from small carved wooden cups of seal blood and eat Mason's bananas when a yelp is heard from one of the wolves that pulled Mason's sleigh here. Barruk rushes outside to investigate. Mason's wolves have been murdered. Their blood shines brightly in the white snow. The characters see goblins in thick winter coats escaping over a snow-covered knoll. Barruk throws some ice spears onto the sleigh. Tar Xana turns into a jaguar and Barruk transforms into a Woolly Rhino. Mason and Sage ride in the sleigh. They chase down the goblins and with the help of magic missile-infused bananas, Sage's crushing mace, and "chill touch," they murder the goblins in cold blood. Tar Xana is nearly killed, but is able to heal herself with her mending spell. I am reminded of why this game is experiencing a renaissance. It operates in the fourth dimension. It has better graphics than any video game. It occurs in your brain. It is both limitless and bound by seemingly endless rules. It builds community, carves out flow-states, and allows us to dig out yet more tunnels of escape. And with that, another habit is born and The Thought is occluded as I rush full bore into another project.