

# The Third Thought

written by Will Vincent | June 22, 2020



My partner and I drive to the coast where the coves have been crumbled by the titan feet of the sea. To be near the ocean is one of the closer experiences I have ever had to an experience of God—it's bottomless fury and sublime expanse. Edmund Burke says the sublime is not only an experience of serenity and awe, but also horror: "The passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." It is with this feeling that colonizers deluded themselves into seeing a "Wild West" absent of human order. It is with this passion that they murdered countless indigeneous peoples and swallowed the world whole. This is the feeling of the ocean: a great terrible unknowable—a reminder of death. This is the energy that propels Whitman's relentlessly expanding [\*Leaves of Grass\*](#): "A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,/ A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with new contests." But, like so many others, Whitman has been inspired by the Manifest Destiny rhetoric of conquest, and it too will eventually find its endpoint and death in the sea. In Jim Jarmusch's anti-Western *Dead Man*, Johnny Depp plays an anti-imperialist and self-destructive annihilator. Depp enacts Jarmusch's revenge fantasy against all the cowboys and trappers. Depp's indigenous companion, who goes by the name "Nobody", pushes Depp's bullet-ridden body out to sea. Before the credits roll, Nobody is murdered in a wide-shot by one of the psychopath bounty hunters and the film fades to black over Neil Young's haunting electric guitar soundtrack.

My partner and I walk the long beach. There are a few other families here. We debate with each other about whether this is responsible or not. We hike along the bluffs past cyprusses that coil over to create natural tunnels and forts. A couple picnics on a patch of wild grass. We make our way back to the beach to bask and read on the sand. We run around in circles and cut a deep circular path in the sand. Small insects dive back into their holes through the hard crust over the sand as we step. Their diving creates sudden

constellations of holes. We will research this later. "Somehow, life finds a way," we keep saying in a way meant to mock those online extolling how The Thought is inadvertently helping the environment. The endangered snowy plovers wade in the surf as little herds of helpless, adorable things streaked with white, beige, and black.



It is not long before everything becomes an over-extended metaphor for The Thought and the dead. The sandcrab bodies are crushed into the sand like the bones of the dead. A handful of sand is a sublime complexity of their crushed shells and a million other crushed rocks of unknown origin.

We listen to sad songs and drive PCH as the sun fades over the coastal farms and the clouds threaten us with a grey-blue mass of movement. The wind carries weapons. Even it will carry the disease. The radio waves are the mutterings of the dead. The phone is a dead, screaming rectangle. It is covered in microscopic pieces of disease. The dead well-up with great tears and look at the living not from above or below, but from the spaces between us. They come to us in the form of good and bad ideas. The bad ideas of the dead are the loudest, but if you listen closely, you can hear the whisperings of the intelligent dead. We deem our little jaunt irresponsible and vow not to return to the sea until this is all over.

I am fattening on sourdough loaves. I am breathing in the dead and the sky is a dead-blue blue before it finally darkens or is occluded by clouds. There is dead skin on the keyboards and dead stars in the sky. My blood thickens as I consume the fat of dead animals. "Dead and free," they say. The curve is "flattening," but it measures the dead.

In our class before The Thought called COVID-19, we talked about how the divide between the rich and poor, dehumanizing labor practices, prisons, over-militarized police, and corporate surveillance are surely signs that we are living in a dystopia. Tongo Eisen-Martin, the most interesting poet working right now, affirmed this in his spot on [KQED](#).

The rich inhabit cloud cities while people draw rectangles on concrete to ensure that the homeless are socially distanced. Hacker trolls crash Zoom calls. One of my students draws a dick with the annotation function. I seem to always be accidentally leaving some conference call or livestream open so that people can listen. I joke with my partner: "Oh shit, am I streaming?"

The Thought disproportionately kills people of color and the poor. When the colonizers of this continent ran out of physical space, they looked toward the sky, and talked about conquering the moon. Elon Musk, JFK, and Ronald Reagan go to the beach to think about their need for growth and dominance. Reagan: "From the mountains of Kentucky to the shores of California to the Sea of Tranquility on the Moon, our pioneers carried our flag before them." Imperialism finds a way. But, there is another sublime that the poet Peter Gizzi talks about seeing on the New York City subway. It carries its own totalizing unknowable: the experiences of others, faces—each face impossibly complex and different—each carrying a story of destitution or triumph. There is beauty there, too.