

Blood, Blood, Everywhere: Adorno's Theory of Violence in Selected Poems of Russell

Edson

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By Brett Benjamin Kochenower

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In order to truly appraise the value of violence in a work of art, it is crucial that we revisit our opinions and feelings about violence, and that we examine them in the light of critical theory. It is important to understand that there is no such thing as good violence or bad violence. As philosopher Jean-Marie Muller said, "It is essential to define violence in such a way that it cannot be qualified as 'good.' The moment we claim to be able to distinguish 'good' violence from 'bad,' we lose the proper use of the word, and get into a muddle" (qtd. in *Violence* 62-3). Indeed, deeming an act of violence as "good" or "bad" adds unnecessary cultural value that muddles our assessment of it. While violence can be used as a means to disguise a lack of something (plot, acting, funding), the distinctions between what constitutes violence for shock value compared to that which asks for the audience reevaluation of themselves is a debate for a completely different essay; let us assume for our purpose's sake that violence, no matter the context, reveals more about those that partake in it. However, this essay will address the prevailing value of violence in art, and what violent art says about the culture that we inhabit.

In the 20th and 21st century, violence has become readily available amid ever expanding forms of media. Viewers are now rewarded with the most gruesome acts of murder and rape at their local multiplex (or the luxury of their homes) in the form of movies, and can also dismember thousands of people via video game controller. Some would say, though, that the exaggerated forms of violence throughout our popular media serve as a critique of our humanity at large. An example of this that I will discuss later on

is the videogame *Grand Theft Auto*, which is said to be “equal parts social commentary and logical cultural outcome of combining America’s ruthless capitalistic impulse with a valorized national legacy of barbarism and hegemony” (Murray 91). But for all of the moral panic that videogames have caused (*GTA* being the most used example), this same quote can be applied to movies that, through an excess of gore (violent spectacle), can help us better understand our more carnal desires. One could offer *American Psycho*, *A Clockwork Orange*, or *Saving Private Ryan* as examples. Yet video games and movies are not the only “other” forms of media that have critiqued the inhumanity around us to make a point. By analyzing aesthetic theories, examining recent examples of violence in art, and tying these to the poetry and observations of Russell Edson as well as my own work, I will attempt here to reaffirm poetry’s place in the spectrum of popular media pragmatically, by showing just how well it also critiques the world concerning violence. To understand exactly to what extent, one must look at philosophical musings by well-respected aestheticians for guidance.

The German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno studied and wrote about *aesthetics*, a branch of philosophy. Aesthetics, of course, is the study of beauty, and the framework for judging beauty in works of art. Many influential and renowned writers have written for this genre, including Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marshall McLuhan. And while each of these writers has brought his own unique insight into how society values beauty, Adorno’s theories pay special attention to how the darker aspects of art (such as violence and the obscene), and can help us to understand the culture we occupy.

In Adorno's book, *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno believes that successful art needs to be a sponge that soaks up the social conscience of the time: "To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality" (Adorno 39). To expound upon this idea, what we as a culture (this "we" is merely the majority and not the absolute) appreciate about art is that it helps to reaffirm our place within reality. A piece of art is socially formed, making not only the artist--but also the consumer--a part of a cyclical process: For example, an artist creates many pieces of art, but, perhaps only one of the five pieces he creates actually sells. Now there is a trend for this particular style where none was before; even if the original buyer never buys another painting, an excess of this type of art is produced, making the next buyer more likely to buy a painting in the same style since there is more of this type, so the probability will be higher, but also once the next buyer might pick up on the unspoken trend of this painting and may wish to buy it for its unspoken trendiness. The artist then must appease his audience by cashing in on his surroundings, which in turn allows historians to analyze and hypothesize the historical ramifications of events in context during the creation of each creative piece; going to an art museum and seeing the styles of Baroque, expressionism, and realism offers a glimpse into what a certain time, and country, emphasized in the manner of dress, subjects, and architecture. Artwork can then be rightly viewed as a lens into what is deemed popularly important. Not only can artwork be used as a measure of what is popular at a given time, but as Hilde Heynen's explains in her essay, "Architecture between Modernity and Dwelling: Reflections on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," it can also become critical of that period: "Adorno demonstrates the ways in which the social determination of the artistic material and the

autonomous artistic processing of this material dialectically lead to a work that is critical toward its social reality” (Heynen 84). Heynen goes on to explain that Adorno sees artwork as a negative, and it is through this negative that perhaps the world can rightly find itself in utopia: “For him, the objective of modern art is to make people aware of the terrifying aspects of everyday life. Given the circumstances, negativity is the only possible way to keep the ideal of the utopian vivid” (Heynen 83). This utopia can be envisioned when negative aspects of life are put into art, and then viewed by an audience. Once a piece of art has invoked this feeling of utopia, it will gain a following. More people will enjoy the piece of art because it clearly details another world that they wish to grasp. To gain insight into the context of this violent art that brings forth the feeling of negativity and a longing for a lost utopia, it would be prudent to look at a video game example that has become a controversial staple in the 21st century: *Grand Theft Auto*.

When one thinks of a popular work of art synonymous with violence, there is no better example than the video game franchise *Grand Theft Auto*, by [publisher] Rockstar Games. Since its first release in 1997, with the original *Grand Theft Auto*, and the subsequent nine games in the series, critics, parents, and entire countries have condemned it: “British, German and French officials condemned it before a single unit sold. Brazil banned it outright” (IGN). In an article by Rus McLaughlin titled “The History of *Grand Theft Auto*,” McLaughlin explains the evolution of *Grand Theft Auto*, as well as the reason for *GTA* to gain the moniker as a game that wanted to “terrify every parent, outrage every politician, and represent what a real game could do when it didn't hold anything back” (IGN). What has made the *GTA* series such a controversial game is the way that it allows the player the ability to commit atrocious crimes and to participate in

lewd acts. Such acts include the ability to run over pedestrians, to rob stores, and perhaps the most heinous of the games acts, the ability to kill a police officer. With an open world at gamers' fingertips, and an assortment of deadly weapons (chainsaws, shotguns--even a screwdriver), gamers have flocked to buy each new entry in the series. With the release of the latest game in the series, *GTA: IV*, Rockstar has even earned a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records by selling 500 million dollars worth of units in one week (CNET). It is with the help of such games as *GTA* that video games now outgross movies.

Even with such touted politicians as Hillary Clinton trying to put restrictions on *GTA* ("Senator Hillary Clinton famously proposed writing legislation to impose federal oversight and policing of game sales in the U.S,"), nothing has stopped gamers' bloodlust from being quenched (IGN). Even though *GTA* is filled with negative images and messages, Adorno would see this game as an example of art that allows the consumer to become absorbed in a world that is a digital copy of their own; thus, the viewer is bombarded with negativity to the point that the viewer wishes to escape to a utopia. In Soraya Murray's essay "High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing Grand Theft Auto," Murray explains that the world created in Grand Theft Auto is crafted in such a way as to make the gamer feel at ease in his or her environment: "By tapping into recognizable cultural signifiers such as film, fashion, music, and slang, the designers of *GTA* are able to establish a virtual sense of 'place' that enriches one's overall experience" (Murray 92). This seems to corroborate Adorno's idea that "all art is negative": No matter what art is created, all art makes us long for utopia. This is why *GTA* is so appealing, because it acts as a surrogate of ourselves, one that laments and is a part of the filth, grime, and

imperfection of the world in which we live. An example of this in the game would be how AI controlled characters will rob and attack each other while the rest of the AI-controlled citizens will simply ignore the violence taking place. We enjoy it inasmuch as it sympathizes with us. Within the more recent GTA games (graphical improvements and software upgrades have helped to make more things assessable in the GTA universe), players are able to go into a clothing store and buy the latest fashion, go on dates, and even surf the Internet. Besides the cultural references that are made throughout the game, the game itself is grounded in reality by the ways the environment changes with the help of an in-game clock: "...one second of actual time equals one minute; one minute equals one hour and twenty-four minutes becomes a day. During these daily cycles the sun rises and sets, as does the moon. There are seasons and weather patterns" (IGN 93). It is understandable why it can become difficult to distinguish between the realities of these temporal movements in-game and out. Nothing is without a model in the GTA universe, whether it is the trees, clothes, weather, or even the violence. Knowing this, we can see that the sensational aspects of *GTA*, the "hooker killing" and the mowing down of civilians are overshadowed by the many mundane tasks that are programmed into this world to look and work just like ours. If it was about the violence alone, about the feelings reproduced in pure killing, why would these other aspects be programmed in? As Adorno states, art is appealing in that it imitates life and shows us what is ordinary.

It would come as no surprise to Adorno that *Grand Theft Auto* has garnered such a following: "Scarcely anything is done or produced in artworks that does not have its model, however latently, in social production" (Adorno 236). Simply put, the actions in *Grand Theft Auto* are not beyond comprehension. In Alex Thomson's book, *Adorno: A*

Guide for the Perplexed, Thomson postulates on Adorno's idea that art is battling with itself: "... in the face of extremity, art becomes self-critical, as if tearing itself apart in the face of the awful reality of a world in which genocide, nuclear destruction, and man's inhumanity are so evident" (Thomson 56). At any moment our lives can end, so humans look for an outlet, and what better escape than art? *Grand Theft Auto* is an interactive medium for gamers to fulfill their darkest of desires without repercussions. Not only that, but art is a mirror of our reality, which Adorno and many critics have used to examine why we enjoy the violence that surrounds us. One of these philosophers, Slavoj Zizek, is known for his topical discussion of violence.

Zizek is a critical theorist and philosopher who has taught and spoken at some of the most prestigious colleges, and his observations on popular media, particularly film theory, have made him something of a celebrity. His opinions have been published in the *New York Times*, and he has written countless books, appearing on numerous television and radio programs. He is a regarded movie critic (*The Perverts Guide to Cinema*), and he claims a substantial amount of viewers on *YouTube*. Zizek's credentials aside, the postulations that he makes on violence are pertinent to the discussion at hand.

I want to first look at Zizek's teachings of Lacan on the subject of the symbolic other—one of the most basic ideas in Lacanian thought. In Lacanian thought, the other is the unseen, unknowable force that we as a culture inform. This force, dictates the style and substance of our cultural exchanges (from the grammar of our conversations to what we think and speak about). As Zizek explains, in order to have a conversation, an exchange of ideas, people must first share a language. The language itself uses words, grammar—limiting constructs that help to determine one meaning by selecting a signifier

among a sea of signifiers. Beyond that, connotations, subtleties, veiled meanings, and so on, which shade the conversation in further meaning—a listener may even raise his eyebrows slightly and look towards the ceiling in a gesture that signals annoyed disbelief. All of these aspects of culture which help to convey an idea, from the phonemes to the glance, have been stored into this other so that everyone will understand its meaning. What we get in meaning, though, we must pay for in a limiting of ideas: Our language dictates what we can (or have the ability to) say. A new waggle of the brow does not create a new meaning, but inspires confusion in the interlocutor. Thus is the nature of the other. As Lacan might say, this creates a wedge between our innate drives and our ability to access and express them, as they are both speaking two different, impenetrable languages.

I feel that my poem, “Wooster Lake,” brings to light, in a contemporary way, the distance that the other makes in communication and how it interferes with our relationships with us and with others. In the poem, there are two characters, the male narrator and the ex-wife of the narrator. The narrator is going to the movies, so that he can see “A 40 something white actor / Playing a 30 something out of med school / Trying to rescue a 20 something / Porcelain faced doe eyed / Actress who soaks up the scenery.” The central tension of the poem arises when the man is chided by the woman for passively accepting the bland, stereotype-ridden plot, which she sees as one of society’s ills.

If a reader were to ask Lacan which character understood the situation better, he would likely say the narrator. The narrator seems to have an understanding of the other in this situation, and is not bothered that it takes up the creative space at the movie theater.

He understands that these stereotypes came from someplace, and that the people that speak it are ultimately not masters of the culture, but servants; for example, Žižek explains that “Even when my desires are transgressive, even when they violate social norms, this very transgression relies on what it transgresses” (Žižek 42). He is passively accepting of this, knowing that he cannot change what the other is filled with, and that watching one movie will not change how the other is shaped. The woman is angered by what she perceives as the man’s collusion with society’s one-dimensional treatment of people, and feels that he is a complicit arbiter of this type of exploitative characterization. What the woman fails to see, however, is that the stereotypes she sees in the movie, are guided by the same rhetoric that she herself espouses. The cultural products that she finds distasteful, the empty forms of culture (the helpless woman, the monster that terrorizes her), are mirrored in her critique of those cultural products. Her assessment is as dashed off as the themes of the movie. Her comments sound like the empty anger of a woman who does not understand that the movie is a mere product of the culture from which she herself springs, much like picking an apple off a tree and smashing it underfoot to kill a diseased tree. These ideas that she has (“She told me that the lack of diversity in our lives / Was killing our nation”)--the ideas of the importance of diversity, and the amount of importance attributed to it, are ideas taken from the other. These countercultural ideas could be anything—we could wake up one day to find that the people at large discriminate on the basis of ear size, middle finger length, or amount of words we can memorize. What we value and the way we value it is based solely on the other. While the narrator may have a more defeatist attitude about the situation, he doesn’t struggle in vain in the face of it. “I told her it was just a movie / With a nasty gorilla monster / Trying to

eat innocent young white girls / She told me to analyze what I just said / And hung up the phone / I went to the movie anyways.” Clearly, by the end of the poem, it is understandable why this relationship between the narrator and the woman collapsed, because the man’s actions make him unable to change to the opinion of what the woman believes what the other should represent.

Poets have a history of pushing boundaries by being adamant to discuss taboo topics such as sex, religion, and for the purpose of this paper, violence; poets use purposeful depictions about what to depict and how it should be depicted. One of these poets, Russell Edson, has been labeled a forefather of prose poetry in America, and his poems can be found within countless “best of” anthologies. I chose Russell Edson for his renowned status in the field of prose poetry, which is a poetic form that I am currently writing. I also chose to look at his work for his willingness to work with violence in his poetry through his use of uncanny violence in domestic situations. By this I mean that he will take a criticism of American life (that we are more focused on the wellbeing of our possessions than the wellbeing of our loved ones) and represent it in a way that feels strange and ridiculous.

To classify Edson’s approach to poetry, it is important to get our bearings by exploring his poetry. The poem “The Bloody Rug,” is just a glimpse of Edson’s repertoire that uses violence as a springboard to dive frightfully toward a startling conclusion. The poem “The Bloody Rug” starts off with a daughter beating her father for inappropriately touching her: “A daughter was beating up her father. . . . / Have mercy, child, cried the bloodied father, I might, in/ defending myself, have unintentional contact with your parts; / my fingers tangled unintentionally in your underclothes” (*Rooster’s*

23). The beginning of the poem sets the reader instantly on guard. Just as the father is protesting for the beating to stop, the reader is drawn to the family conflict, and tiptoes forth, wondering what will transpire next. What happens next is that the mother interjects by asking the reason for which they are fighting. This seems like a sensible question to ask, yet the dark humor becomes apparent when the father and daughter bicker like children in front of the mother over subjects as taboo as sexually assaulting one's daughter or physically attacking one's father "To keep him from tangling his fingers in my underclothes. / That's a lie, cried the father. She suddenly attacked me, / and in defending myself I feared I might have unintentional contact with her part, which is against the law; my fingers / tangled unintentionally in her underclothes, which is also/ against the law" (*Rooster's* 23). At this point in the poem, the reader is caught in the fighting and unable to back away. The reader must see it through. With bated breath, the reader waits to see exactly how the mother will punish her mischievous daughter and husband, and with one final coup de grace, Edson leads the reader running straight into an unsettling ending "The mother looking up again from staring at the rug said, / Please don't beat dad. / Why? Said the daughter. / Because you're getting blood on the rug" (*Rooster's* 23). The revelation at the end that the family, mother included, are grotesque caricatures oblivious of their own hurtful actions (the mother cares more about the rug than the abuse) would not surprise a follower of Edson's poetry.

Donald Hall, poet and critic, discusses the works of Russell Edson in the essay "On Russell Edson's Genius." Hall likens the poetry of Edson with a landscape of characters that are internally amiss: "This narrative spectacle refers to nothing outside itself. It is reflective, creating out of a personal cosmos a dangerous world where

everything and everyone is perfectly exchangeable, renewable, and eatable. There's a good deal of cannibalism in Edson, among other taboos broken" (Hall 12). This technique Edson uses of creating a world, and then slowly filling the scenery with characters intent only on manipulating and destroying one another fits perfectly with the poem "Bloody Rug." Besides human characters being torn asunder, Edson is also known for using animals in his grotesquerie.

The much anthologized poem by Edson titled "Counting Sheep" begins with the introduction of a scientist wondering what to do with a newly created experiment: "A scientist has a test tube full of sheep. He wonders if he should try to / shrink a pasture for them" (*The Tunnel* 135). Just as in "The Bloody Rug," the reader is taken aback by the setting they have been thrust into, and begins to expect the worst. These fears are soon realized when the scientist apathetically goes through a list of options that might appease him: "He wonders if they could be used as a substitute for rice, a sort of / woolly rice . . . / He wonders if he just shouldn't rub them into red paste between his / fingers / He wonders if they're breeding, or if any of them have died" (*Tunnel* 135). With so many devilish options at hand, the scientist ends up falling asleep while humorously counting sheep ("He puts them under a microscope and falls asleep counting them..." [135]). The structure of this poem is befitting of an Edson poem. At the beginning, we are introduced to a situation that seems otherworldly, yet completely grounded in a feasible reality; each year a new discovery is made because of the advancements within the scientific community, and science on the whole has made exponential progress since industrialization—there are even plans to clone the long extinct woolly mammoth, so miniature sheep are not incomprehensible, but an uncanny symbol of how the unreal has

been made rational by science. Then, the poem ends without completely resolving the situation, but leaving the reader with a grisly lingering effect that all good horror stories are remembered for; sometimes, it is not the shock of an otherworldly spectacle that haunts us, but our recognizing the commonplace, the familiar, in the horror that is the most haunting. Just as new technology makes the strange commonplace (take, for example, electric lights that possess the power of the sun), science too has the ability to shake and shift morality; actions that would've seemed barbaric or thoughtless have been cast aside because our ethnics cannot match the speed with which we come up with new inventions. Now the question to answer becomes, "Why does Edson follow a similar formula of violence throughout his poetry?"

In fact, as author Lee Upton points out in his essay "Cruel Figures: The 'Anti-Forms' of Russell Edson," Edson has a purpose for showing his characters in such an unflattering way:

For all their seeming absurdity, his prose poems are shaded by moral feeling, particularly by his disgust toward patterns of ideological violence. In his prose poems human agency is frustrated by predetermined forms. Even a notion of the private self is abandoned in favor of an ultimate objectification of being and experience. With particular vividness he portrays the absence of any appropriate affective response to suffering. That is, his characters' failure to recognize and to respond thoughtfully to brutality, both of their own brutality and to that of others, accounts for much of his prose poems' unsettling capacities." (Upton 55)

An ideology is that which governs our actions: the beliefs that have been passed down and accepted as the true way to conduct oneself. At the core of Edson's poetry is

the idea that corrupt ideologies are the reason why not only his characters, but humanity as a whole, have become indifferent when witnessing violence:

His characters' deadpan acceptance of whatever initially appears to be perverse and improbable in their environments reflects Edson's focus on political "actuality," that is, on *the very thing that happens*. Lack of affect among his characters reflects his sense that the events they undergo are psychological correlatives and entirely predictable outcomes of what he sees as his culture's obsession with violence. (Upton 56)

The poem "The Bloody Rug" at first seems like a distortion of how a family should govern themselves. Of course, an ideology is learned through seeing (modeling), or being told what is acceptable (banking). The characters in "The Bloody Rug," believe that their actions are not outside the ordinary. By showing his characters' acceptance of violence (as when the mother lazily chides her daughter for maiming the father), Edson reminds us of Adorno's principle of art being a reflection of its culture. It is demonstrative of the tragic irony that Edson sees in the American family and misguided aims that they possess: The daughter, in beating her father, fears the bogeyman of perversion and pedophilia more and lets this get in the way of her actual knowledge of her father's character; the mother, whose focus is materialistic, places emphasis in material goods over human life. Human life has little value in "Bloody Rug" and in the poem "Counting Sheep" where a newly created species of sheep are given the same respect.

"Counting Sheep" is similar to "Bloody Rug" in that the main character of "Counting Sheep" is detached from the possible violence he can bestow upon the sheep, and thus views their emotions as insignificant. Children are known to kill insects with

magnifying glasses, a tried and true method, and enjoy the experience with a cool, almost scientific, detachment. Children gain excitement from this primarily because they are given god like powers (able to take away life), and thus retain an inkling throughout their life that some things can be disposable; is not the basis for most discoveries tried and tested on some living subject? The ideology of experimentation is engrained because human curiosity wins out over that of good will. Like a child deciding what instrument to use to take the legs off a grasshopper, the scientist in the poem is weighing his options. The reader does not sympathize with the scientist, but can understand his train of thought. Once the reader understands why he is doing this, Edson has already made his point that the ideology of violence can be excused as long as something beneficial comes from it, even if it is simple curiosity. Adorno, Zizek, and Edson have expounded on their ideas of what makes our society violent, and Edson himself has used poetry as a means to critique a world on the brink of its own self-destruction; is not the scientist in "Counting Sheep" a believable image of just one scientist among many who create something only with the intention of seeing how they can manipulate and destroy it. For my own poetry, I see the influence of society weighing heavily on my craft.

In my poem "Oppenheimer at the Fair," the title character is Julius Robert Oppenheimer, who was the director of the Manhattan project, which produced the first nuclear bomb. The history of what happened with those bombs are well known: the United States used Oppenheimer's invention to kill hundreds of thousands of people during World War II, and then subsequently, an arms race of nuclear weapons were stockpiled by the United States and the Soviet Union during what is known as the Cold War. Oppenheimer himself regretted his invention for the chaos it brought upon the

world, and went into a mental psychosis over the ordeal. To begin the poem, I wanted to start off with a literal bang: “Exploding dandelions / dart out across / the black sheet sky.” Not only is the allusion to a nuclear blast brought up, but the setting of a fair is ripe for images of Americana and freedom while also bringing up connotations of thrill, danger, and safety. Previously, Adorno had mentioned that it is no surprise that art imitates violence with such things as nuclear destruction looming over our heads. I have taken my knowledge of nuclear destruction and created images of the aftermath at Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “Walking down the grounds / orange sparklers weave a line towards/ the games, where charcoal coats / stand being pulled on by/ anxious ash hands.” After the initial blast at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was fire and ash. The bodies that were not vaporized by the blast became covered in ash, and the survivors coming out of a grey filled city that was once bustling with life is an unforgettable image. I continue with the image of burning by showing a child with cotton candy on his lips, which is something that one might see while strolling through a fair “I pick up the air gun, / missing all the targets; / Beaten by a child with / cotton candy melted /on his lips.” I also wanted Oppenheimer, who in real life was traumatized by the chaos that he created, to be beaten by a child that would remind him of this. The fair itself is a conceptual hell for Oppenheimer, who in the conclusion is left alone to hear the screams of children “I wait, / hearing the sounds / of distant screams.” Oppenheimer goes through a process in this poem that very few people experience, which is the knowledge that one’s actions can have violent repercussions. Adorno believed that art is created based on society’s need for reaffirmation, and Oppenheimer created something based on what society felt it needed, is a weapon so powerful that it would end any war. Oppenheimer is then a model

of a scientist who creates, but does not understand the impact of that creation; the scientist in “Counting Sheep,” also fits this description. The poem suggests that it is fitting that Oppenheimer must pay for his actions, but Adorno would maintain that in analysis of the work, is important to understand that he is merely a man of his times. At the end of the poem, when he sits alone, his repercussions come crashing down on him. The poem re-contextualizes an historic event into a carnival setting to express his outsider status. The way the carnival workers, children, and fireworks are all re-contextualized to have a sad, frightening feeling helps the reader to quantify Oppenheimer’s (and the world’s) loss of innocence and safety.

At the beginning of the poem “Animal Suicide,” the reader will notice that anthropomorphism is used to bring human characteristics to a party filled with animals: “Opossums are number one in small mammal suicide / they brag about this at parties / making sure the skunks and cats / overhear their chatter.” The irony here is that the opossums gloat that they are superior to other animals, but to achieve this they must die. Even worse, the animals have made a game of it “all the animals are tired of this / even the squirrels have taken up / the cause to willingly die to preserve / the balance of nature.” The extreme these animals will go to in order to be noticed is the point at which the poem makes a statement about the fame-seeking society that we live in: “Brushing the knots out of their children’s fur / father squirrels now wake their children up early / telling them they are going on a vacation / they descend down the trees / hearing their fathers words / as they run out onto the blacktop.” Edson also uses anthropomorphism to reveal human flaws (the animals of choice for Edson’s satirical outlook on human behavior are sheep, elephants, and cows). This poem also plays with this convention by

likening the willingness of animals to die to that of suicide bombers. The importance is that suicide bombings have not declined, but escalated. One can blame the media for making suicide bombings popular within these areas where it is prevalent (no doubt someone has killed themselves for the sake of popularity), but there is something more at stake than people wanting to die because a news story might mention their name. Instead, the majority of suicide bombers were planted, born, and grown into a family that has passed down a continuing ideology to fear the Lacanian “other.” (This “other” is that which does not coincide with his or her beliefs). Once the suicide bomber has matured enough, they are plucked from their homes, told that their actions can cure an inherently wrong world, and then strapped with a bomb where they proceed to walk into a crowded square, bus stop, movie theater, or a number of other locations and detonate themselves. Taking a cue from Edson, I have shown that with the help of a few animals one can turn a poem into a social critique of how the family can be a place where you are born only as a means to help further an endless and mute cause.

The image of Oppenheimer on the outskirts of the fair is a good visual image to end with. I feel like the through line of my work, Adorno’s work, and Edson’s work, is violence and the regret that follows it. Adorno believed in negative art, negative creativity: he felt that we should be careful of what we bring into the world, since we are all active agents of violence. Oppenheimer is a prime example of the dangers associated with this—he unleashed a potent device for destruction onto the world. I think that, with Adorno’s help, I can be a person, a poet, that is mindful of the work that I create. With my poetry, with “Oppenheimer at the Fair” and others, I wish to be a helpful, mindful, tactful critic of the social ills and eccentricities I see around me. I feel that, in a way,

violence is much like an atom bomb: it is a powerful device when used in writing, but it must be used with caution.

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Animal Suicide

Opossums are number one in small mammal suicide

they brag about this at parties
making sure the skunks and cats
overhear their boasts

all the animals are tired of this

even the squirrels have taken up
the cause to willingly die to preserve
the balance of nature

brushing the knots out of their children's fur
father squirrels now wake their children up early
telling them they are going on a vacation

they descend down the trees
hearing their fathers words
as they run out onto the blacktop

Wooster Lake

They Found It In Wooster Lake
Was playing at the drive in
At midnight.

I called up my ex-wife and asked if she wanted to go.
I told her the movie was about
A 40 something white actor
Playing a 30 something out of med school
Trying to rescue a 20 something
Porcelain faced doe eyed
Actress who soaked up the scenery
Like a name brand paper towel.

She told me that the lack of diversity in our lives
Was killing our nation.

I told her it was just a movie
With a nasty gorilla monster
Trying to eat innocent young white girls.

She told me to analyze what I just said
And hung up the phone.

I went to the movie anyways.

Oppenheimer at the Fair

Exploding dandelions
dart out across
the black sheet sky.
Thousands attend to see
red mixed with red
evaporate into
white and blue.

Walking down the grounds
orange sparklers weave a line towards
the games, where charcoal coats
stand being pulled on
by anxious ash hands.

I pick up the air gun,
missing all the targets,
beaten by a child with
cotton candy melted
on his lips.

I turn around seeing
trailing off parents
leave their kids
hanging up high
above the skyline,
spinning.

Gunpowder smoke
wafts through the tent
as parents take their seats,
waiting for their children to
return.
I wait, hearing
the sounds of distant screams.

Scent

Smitten housewives take their panties
out of the bottom drawer
while their husbands are at work.

They spray them with sample perfume
from the latest issue of Marie Claire,
before placing them on top of the trash.

The garbage man picks them up on his route,
his pockets full,
he waits till their scent is gone

and throws them into the streets;
leaving bread crumbs for the 5 o'clock traffic
back to their houses.

Pirate Sale

Father believes that pirates still exist,
and the 79 Oldsmobile cutlass, lime green, torn out upholstery,
the smell of chips, and pina colada air freshener is our ship.

The ocean of trees and buildings
wave by as we sail
across the grey currents towards

the island of yards,
where castaway garments
and knicknacks want to be rescued.

Our feet leave the shallows of the grey
sea, and land on the warm beach, heading
towards a wind battered cave.

Seashells line the shelf walls,
the ocean still breathing within
their hardened case.

Toys without
pieces line up to fight
an armless war.

Clothes with the scent
of salt, waiting to be washed out.

Yet among these items, Father
finds a gold pocket watch, its chain
scratched, its luster somewhat faded,
but still alluring to look at.

As we leave the cave
and are buckled into the ship,
the pulse of time beats against my hand.
He smiles as the ship roars, headed for home,
treasure in hand.

Family Size Play-doh

She wants to change how her husband looks. The once cute mole that was so unique has become grotesque. So she waits till he is asleep and grasps onto his head, pulling it clean off. The clay feels warm in her hands, and the ease of the dough between her fingers and palm is surprising. So why stop with the head?

His stomach could be less paunchy, and making him taller would be interesting (She had always wanted to sleep with a taller man).

Grabbing up the rest of her husband, she begins to create the perfect man;

Wondering if perhaps her child down the hall

Could use a few changes.

The Indonesian Child Who Smokes Two Packs a Day

Inside the bar you sit with the elders of the village, smoking your cigarette, proud to be off the nipple. The older men tell lurid stories of women they had, and women they almost had. You laugh, proud to be fully grown, taking a long drag off a cigarette (a pretty bar maid hands you a sippy cup filled with whiskey). She says after work she wants to show you where you came from (slowly lifting her dress up to her knees). This act means nothing to you, but you nod your head, proud to be one of the men.

Hirohito Issues the Order to Saipan

10,000 people take the order and jump. 66 years later their bodies are now coming to fruition. Fully ripened they thrash off my roof, and land in my yard. At first, I would spend all night sweeping guts out of the gutters and bagging up loose arms and feet. Now, I let angry city officials use chainsaws to reach my front door telling me to clean up my yard, because nobody wants to look at history when they drive-by.

Heavenly Treat

I take my cat to church. She enjoys the acoustics, and how when the congregants sing their hymns it's one extended purr. At first it was only a few people that brought their cats, but now, we spend hours picking birds and mice out of the commune plate.

The preacher gives a sermon on cats. He says nowhere in the bible are cats mentioned, so they must wait outside.

Outside we here them meowing, their fur pressed against the hot brick, waiting for their owners.

Lump

An old man goes door to door offering free breast exams; white trench coat and rubber gloves make it all official. I tell my wife to go to the door when he knocks. She takes off her white blouse and black bra, and rolls her shoulders back. "Keep your eyes forward," he tells her, as he moves his hands in a circular motion, starting at the top of the breast, and then moving over the edges of the areola, and finally stopping at the bottom. Something is wrong. Keep your head straight he tells her again, taking off his gloves and warming up his hands in his pockets. He begins again, focusing on the bottom of the right breast. There is something wrong.

Literal Visit

“I’m glad that your bitch mother is here,” says the cat,
licking its paws

“I’m glad that your pussy father is here,” says the dog,
while wagging its tail.

The in-laws bite and scratch at each other’s throats.

The happy couple takes a nap on the couch.

Cleanup Isle

Down the aisles dolphins swim among
Blues and Greens
Jumping over carts to the amazement of
Adults and kids

After the performance the dolphins
Nestle up to the shoppers
Allowing their slick oily underbellies
To be touched

The children cry when the butchers
With their blood splattered aprons
Carry the dolphins to the back of the store

“There is a red light special on tuna today”
The intercom blares
And the children are quieted with the thought
Of a tuna and egg sandwich.

A Fine House

There is a mini pink house with white shingles at the park. The man shimmies his way into the door

Admiring the amount of detail that has gone into the two small rooms: a bookshelf with glossy covered adventure books, a brown varnished desk for drawing, and storage chest with an assortment of dolls and action figures; everything seems to have a place. He decides to stay. Peering out the windows watching the children play on the equipment, it is not long before a concerned parent calls the police. The officer arrives. His gun drawn. He is ready for anything. Yet he hesitates. He struggles inside. Out of breath he says a faint hello. They sit there. A window for each. Seeing the children and adults teeter back and forth in their happy pink home.

Measuring Up

I excuse myself from the table and go to the bathroom.

I'm in midstream when I notice a man the urinal over watching me pee. I keep my head down. I use my other hand to block his view. He tells me not to. I look up. The man next to him is watching him pee, and the man next to him. I begin to watch all three of them pee. This goes on till we have all shaken and flushed.

We hurry over to the sink, quickly washing our hands and ignoring the towel dispenser as we leave the bathroom, going back to our wives with wet hands.

Bathroom Break

Almost 30, I excuse myself from the table,
not wanting to hear jokes about how I cannot swim.
I lock the bathroom door
and begin to fill the tub.

Naked, I submerge myself.
My penis a periscope;
My fingers the density;
My ass the sea floor.

Knock, they want me to return.
I'm away now. Swimming
through porcelain city landscapes
too beautiful to be preserved.

I could die. Erect, white, the
body when it dies hollows
out and creates a perfect cast
For the water to wash away.

I towel off. Dessert is served.