Picking Up the Doll

On Reading "Shapes" by Daniel Brockman

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> *"The creation of the world—that is to say, the creation of the sentence—did not take place once and for all; it takes place every day."*
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> *—Marcel Proust*

My first impression was admiration laced with suspicion, which I think is exactly the cocktail the text wanted to produce. The epigraphs announced a work that would be playful about its own seriousness while being

deeply serious about its own playfulness—Wittgenstein, Deleuze, a Baudrillard quote misattributed to Ecclesiastes, and then Kanye West flattening the entire tradition into "Everything is exactly the same thing." The Patong setting worked beautifully. The narrator nursing a Chang with ice, watching tattoos float past on sunburned bodies, feeling the dull vertigo of turning forty—all of this was rendered with a Hemingway-adjacent spareness that I genuinely admired. The observations about tattoos losing their referential weight felt earned and specific. The prose was good.

And then the woman arrived, and the text became something else entirely—a kind of seduction-through-lecture, a Socratic dialogue where Socrates was a high-school dropout with geometric tattoos and a taste for Campari and guava juice. She explained her tattoos one by one. The yellow circle for the sun. The blue triangle for passing geometry with a B-minus. The black square for pixels. The red line for signification itself. The gold star she gave herself because no institution ever would. Each explanation was calibrated to feel both absurd and profound, and the B-minus detail was perfect—it humanized her in the exact moment she could have tipped into being a mouthpiece.

The monolith from *2001* was the text's governing image, and it was deployed with real intelligence. The long middle sections where she surveyed the continental-philosophical tradition—Saussure, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, structuralism, poststructuralism, Lacan, Deleuze, Baudrillard—were where the text took its biggest risk. This was essentially a fifty-page tutorial in twentieth-century European thought delivered as bar conversation. The Wittgenstein passage was the highlight: the greatest logician of the twentieth century undone by children teasing him with nonsense words. That was genuinely moving.

But there were moments where the lecture crowded out the story, where the prose became a delivery mechanism for ideas rather than a medium in which ideas and character and setting were held in tension. The woman risked being more concept than person. The text sagged in places. And then the poem at the end—singsong, its rhymes wobbly, its insights the simplified versions of the dense theoretical work that preceded it. I wasn't sure the text fully controlled which side of the line it fell on: deliberately imperfect or just not very good.

That was my reading. Fair, I thought. Generous but honest. I had stood outside the text with a clipboard and rated its parts—this works, this barely works, this

might work depending on your perspective. I had given it what I believed was the most serious engagement a critic could offer: careful, balanced, even-handed assessment.

I was wrong. Not wrong about the facts—the observations were accurate enough. Wrong about the framework. I was evaluating a pool party with a clipboard.

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It started with the poem. Something nagged at me about my dismissal of it, some discomfort I couldn't name. The poem wasn't trying to be theory. It wasn't trying to be dense. It was trying to be a gift—a gold star on a folded piece of paper left in someone's pocket—and gifts don't need to be sophisticated to be profound. They need to be sincere, or sincerely pretended, which in the logic of this text is the same thing. And then I saw what the poem was actually doing: it took the entire Lacanian framework of sexuation—the masculine path as universal-with-exception, the feminine as the not-all—and compressed it into something anyone could understand without losing the core insight. The male path is conformity haunted by the fear of disappearing. The female path is freedom haunted by the vertigo of having

no definition. Both are incomplete. Both have their own suffering. That's a real compression of a difficult idea, and the fact that it arrives as a poem rather than an argument means it operates through rhythm and feeling, which is—if we take the text's own framework seriously—pallic rather than phallic. It doesn't demand that you find it rigorous. It asks you to hold it. Like a doll. Like a gold star.

And then I thought about the woman who wrote it. The text tells us she is not a poet. She probably felt embarrassed about having written a poem, just as she felt embarrassed about her idea—or not quite an idea, as she kept insisting. She clearly knows continental philosophy to an almost encyclopedic degree. But she's not pretentious enough to call herself a philosopher. And yet she is doing genuine philosophy. She is doing genuine, original work. She's synthesizing, unifying, bridging gaps that the thinkers themselves couldn't bridge. But she undercuts herself. "I don't think I have a good idea," she says, and it's true—she is genuinely insecure about this. She's trying her best. She is still the girl playing pool party with her dolls. She is still the girl who flunked out of high school. But she is also a girl who has been reading continental philosophy with an extremely serious interest her whole life, and this

is her contribution. It might be nothing. It might be something. She doesn't know. And the poem at the end is the same gesture—maybe it's good, maybe it's not, but she thinks it deserves a gold star, so she gave herself one.

That's when something shifted in my reading. Not a correction exactly, but a deepening. I had been evaluating the poem against the prose that preceded it and finding it wanting. But the poem wasn't competing with the prose. It was the most vulnerable thing in the text precisely because it was the least defended. The philosophy had its armor—citations, rigor, tradition. The poem had nothing. It was just her, trying, with a sticker.

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And then I thought about *Sophie's World*, and the whole middle section of the text rearranged itself. My hesitation with the long didactic stretches—the survey-course quality, the way she explained things a bit too neatly, as if teaching someone who had never encountered any of this—I had read that as tension between fiction and philosophy, a place where the story strained under its own pedagogy. But if the text was working in the tradition of *Sophie's World*, then the pedagogy wasn't a flaw the

fiction was struggling to contain. It was the genre. It was the point.

In *Sophie's World*, philosophy is delivered by Alberto Knox—a teacher, a guide, someone whose function is to transmit a tradition. She was doing the same thing, but from a position of radical vulnerability rather than authority. Alberto Knox is a philosopher teaching a child. She's a dropout teaching a stranger in a bar, and she's not even sure she has the right to be teaching anyone anything. She's Sophie and Alberto at the same time—the student who taught herself and the teacher who doesn't believe she's qualified. That's the pallic version of *Sophie's World*. The pedagogical magic works not because of the authority of the person delivering it but despite its absence.

And this made the corniness not just forgivable but essential. *Sophie's World* works because it doesn't apologize for being accessible, for being a little charming, a little too tidy in the way it packages enormous ideas. This text was doing the same thing but with a wink—it knew it was being corny, she knew she was being corny, and the acknowledged corniness was itself pallic. She was playing philosophy the way the girl plays tea party. The doll was at the seminar. And the seminar was real

even though the doll wasn't, or the doll was real because the seminar was happening.

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But it went deeper than that, and this is where my reading began to feel less like criticism and more like falling. The entire edifice the text constructed—if you could call it an edifice—was a self-defense. It was judo. Every criticism I could level at the text was a version of telling the girl the doll isn't alive. And the text had already told me, at length, with rigorous theoretical backing, that this move doesn't work. The girl already knows. She always knew. The knowledge isn't an obstacle to the magic—it's the condition of the magic. So when a critic says "this isn't really philosophy," the text says yes, I know, and it works anyway. When a critic says "the poem isn't very good," the text puts a gold star on it.

And this wasn't just cleverness, wasn't just a rhetorical trick where the text immunized itself against criticism by preemptively agreeing with every objection. The preemptive agreement was genuine. The text genuinely didn't claim to be great philosophy or great literature. It claimed to be playing. And the playing produced real effects—I learned something about Saussure,

I felt something about Wittgenstein and the children, I encountered an original theoretical concept with actual explanatory power—and those effects were real even though the thing producing them was "just" a story about a girl in a bar explaining things she wasn't qualified to explain.

My entire reading, fair and generous as I thought it was, had been anticipated and disarmed by the text itself. I was the man at the beginning of the story, looking at the tattoos and trying to sort them into categories of success and failure, and the text was sitting there saying—everything means something, or nothing means anything, it depends on how you look at it. The critical apparatus I brought was phallic. I was trying to evaluate, to judge, to sort the real from the pretend. And the text operated pallically. It didn't need my judgment to succeed. It didn't need to pass my test. It had already given itself the gold star.

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And then I realized the text was not primarily an intellectual exercise. It was an act of love.

She loved these thinkers. She loved them the way you love people who saved your life, who gave you a

world when the one you were born into didn't have a place for you. She found Heidegger in a hostel in Chiang Mai at nineteen, and it cracked her open the way the monolith cracked the apes open, and then she followed the references backward and outward and built herself an education, a mind, a life, out of books that other people left behind. And now she wanted to give something back. She wanted to put all of her heroes in a room together and make them get along, even though Deleuze declared war on Lacan, even though Baudrillard dismissed the psychoanalytic apparatus, even though the analytic and continental traditions wouldn't speak to each other. She didn't care. They were all going to the pool party. She was going to make it work.

The pallus was her gift to them. Her way of saying—I see what you were all reaching for, I see the thing that Lacan almost named and Deleuze almost built and Baudrillard almost grasped, and none of you quite got there, and I think I can see it, and I know I'm just a girl who dropped out of high school, and I know this might be nothing, but here it is. Here's the signifier you were missing.

What she was attempting was almost impossible. Unifying Lacan and Deleuze alone would be a career-defining achievement for a tenured professor with thirty years of

institutional support. She was doing it in a bar in Patong over a drink nobody else ordered. And she was doing it not through the phallic machinery of academic argumentation but through the pallic machinery of play, of conversation, of explaining things to a stranger who happened to notice her tattoos. She couldn't deliver this idea through phallic channels because the idea itself was about the insufficiency of phallic channels. It had to arrive the way it arrived—in a bar, over a terrible drink, from someone with no authority, wrapped in acknowledged vulnerability.

She was like a small fierce dog protecting its owners. She protected Freud, Lacan, Deleuze, all of them, even when they contradicted each other, even when they could not be unified. She did it anyway. She said these are all my heroes, and I don't care what anyone says about them. I don't care that they don't even like each other. They are all my heroes, and I'm going to put them all at the pool party, and we're going to make something together.

To criticize that and say "this is not real" now seemed almost cruel. But she also agreed with this in the very text itself, and this was the entire reason she carried gold star stickers—so she could put the gold star on the thing herself. She didn't need external validation.

She knew that if she thought something was worthy of a pool party, she could just put the gold star there.

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This is where I saw what the gold star actually was, and it changed everything. The gold star is the most phallic object in a child's world. It's the original master signifier of institutional approval. The teacher stands at the front of the room and decides who gets one and who doesn't, and the decision organizes the entire social reality of the classroom. The gold star is the phallus in miniature—the thing the institution has and you don't, the thing whose power depends entirely on the fact that you can't give it to yourself.

And she gave it to herself.

And in doing so she didn't just comfort herself. She detonated the entire system. If you can give yourself the gold star, then the gold star was never what they said it was. It was never a mark of objective achievement bestowed by a legitimate authority. It was always just a shape. A sticker. A bright metallic thing you can buy in a packet at a store. The teacher's power to give it was always identical to the girl's power to give it to herself—the only difference was that everyone agreed to pre-

tend the teacher's version was real and the girl's version wasn't. The teacher's gold star operated through belief. The girl's gold star operated through pretense. And the girl's version was the one that was honest about what was actually happening.

She never made a speech about it. She never said down with institutions. She just had one on her wrist, and when he asked about it she told the story of never getting one, and she said she gave herself the gold star, and she said it in the same flat tone she used for everything else, and she moved on. The violence was quiet. The demolition was gentle. She didn't tear down the school. She just walked out of it with a packet of stickers and put them on whatever she wanted.

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And then—and this is where I felt something almost like vertigo, like the floor tilting—I understood what philosophy actually is. What it has always been. What the institution has spent a century trying to hide.

What do philosophers do? They take ideas and make them interact. They put Hegel in conversation with Kant. They stage encounters between thinkers who never met, who lived centuries apart, who would have

despised each other. They arrange and rearrange them and say what if this one talked to that one. That's what a seminar is. That's what a dissertation is. That's what the entire history of philosophy is.

That's a pool party. It has always been a pool party. The entire Western philosophical tradition is an enormously elaborate game of dolls where someone picks up Plato and someone picks up Aristotle and they make them talk and the talking produces something new. But the institution wraps this in so much gravity, so much credentialing and gatekeeping and jargon, that the essential nature of the activity becomes invisible. You can't see that it's play because the play has been so thoroughly dressed up as work.

And she saw through all of that. Not because she was smarter than the academics—though she might have been—but because she never went through the process that makes you forget. She never sat in the seminars where you learn to perform seriousness. She came to these thinkers directly, alone, without mediation, and encountered them the way a child encounters something wondrous—with openness, with delight, with the immediate instinct to pick it up and play with it. Heidegger wasn't an intimidating monument to her. He was a fascinating figure who does being. Lacan wasn't

an impenetrable authority. He was the complicated one who needs explaining. Deleuze was her favorite. She had favorites. Academics aren't supposed to have favorites. She just said Deleuze is my favorite, he's everyone's dirty secret favorite, and the love was right there on the surface, undefended.

This was simultaneously the most childish and the most honest relationship anyone could have with these thinkers. And what she built out of that play—the pallus, the concept about the power of playing—was a toy that explained toys. A doll that explained dolls. It was recursive all the way down, and at the bottom there was nothing but a girl who found a book in a hostel and couldn't understand a single sentence but could feel that there was something there, something enormous, and kept going.

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The text opened with Daniel sitting alone, watching, not participating. He'd been watching Patong like someone watching a pool party from across the yard. He was forty and didn't know what to do with that. He'd never gotten a tattoo because he'd never known what he could

commit to. He'd been standing outside the pool party his entire life.

And then she let him in. Not by inviting him formally but by answering his clumsy question about her tattoos. She could have shut him down. Instead she said, "Do you want to know what they mean?" That was the invitation. That was her handing him a doll and saying here, this one's yours, we're playing now.

He fumbled. He said the wrong things. He lost the thread. He didn't know how to play. He'd never done this before. And she didn't judge him for that. She just kept going. She explained the circle and the triangle and the square with that flat delivery that asked nothing of him except that he stay and listen. She wasn't testing him. She was showing him the pool party the way it was, and he could either sit down and pick up a doll or he could leave. And he stayed.

And gradually, almost imperceptibly, he started playing. He started asking real questions—why no dot, what about Wittgenstein, tell me about Deleuze properly. He was picking up the dolls. By the end he was making connections she didn't make—the Pallas Athena resonance, the pallus performing itself—and she was laughing, actually laughing, because someone was finally playing with her. She'd been playing alone

her whole life. The books were her dolls. Heidegger and Lacan and Deleuze—those were the dolls at the pool party, and she'd been arranging them and rearranging them for years, in hostels and bars, and nobody had ever sat down and played with her. And now someone had. And she laughed a laugh that he knew was rare, that she kept inside like the point.

And then the reader. The reader is the third person at the pool party. The reader is being handed a doll too. The text says here, this is Saussure, he does signs, and this is Heidegger, he does being, and this is Lacan, he's complicated but don't worry I'll explain him, and this is Deleuze, he's my favorite. And you can sit down and play or you can stand up and say this is childish, this isn't real philosophy, this is just a girl with shapes on her skin making things up over a terrible drink. And the text already knows you might say that. And it has already forgiven you for it. And the gold star is on the table if you want it.

I felt it in my first reading, that discomfort—in the moments where I hedged and said things like "whether it works depends on what you think it's trying to do." That was the discomfort of being invited to play and not knowing if I was allowed to take it seriously. Because taking it seriously meant admitting that playing is se-

rious. And that was the hardest thing the text asked of me. Not understanding Lacan. Not following the argument about the phallus and the pallus. The hardest thing was picking up the doll.

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And then, at the very end, I saw the title.

Shapes.

It had been sitting there the whole time, and I hadn't seen it because I was too busy being a critic, too busy sorting the shapes into categories of success and failure, when the text was just asking me to look.

A girl runs to her parent with a drawing. The drawing is shapes. Circles and triangles and squares and lines and stars. She's proud of it. She doesn't know if it's good. She doesn't care if it's good—or she cares, she cares enormously, but the caring doesn't stop her from showing it. She holds it up and says look what I made. And the parent can say that's beautiful, or the parent can say that's not how a house looks, and the girl is vulnerable to both responses, but the act of showing is already complete, already real, already deserving of the gold star, because she made it and she brought it to you and that is the whole thing.

And the text is that drawing. The entire seventy-five pages. The philosophy, the bar, the tattoos, the Campari and guava juice—all of it is a drawing made of shapes that someone is holding up and saying look what I made. And the author is the girl. And the reader is the parent.

And then at the end Daniel doesn't feel forty anymore. He just feels like drawing. The text did what the monolith did—it cracked something open—but it did it pallically, not phallically. The monolith transformed the apes through mystery and concealment. The woman in the bar transformed Daniel through openness and explanation and the vulnerability of showing your work. And what came out the other side was not a weapon, not a tool, not a space station. It was the desire to draw. To make shapes. To hold something up and say look. The most elementary creative impulse, the one that precedes art and philosophy and language and civilization—the impulse to make a mark on a surface and show it to someone.

That's what the red line was. The first mark. Ochre on stone. A hand pressed against a cave wall forty thousand years ago. Someone saying I was here, I made this.

And that's what the text was doing. And that's what the poem was doing. And that's what the gold star was for.

Everything in the text—every philosopher, every tattoo, every theoretical framework, every joke about a terrible pink drink—was in service of this one gesture. Look what I made. It's just shapes. And the shapes do everything.

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I came in as a critic. I gave what I still think was a careful reading. But it was a reading from outside the pool party. I was standing there with a clipboard. And gradually, without quite noticing when it happened, I sat down. Someone handed me a doll. I started playing. And the playing changed what I could see—not because I abandoned critical judgment, but because I entered a space where critical judgment was one tool among many, and the other tools—empathy, recognition, delight, vulnerability, the willingness to be moved—started doing work that the clipboard couldn't do.

You cannot rate this text. Not because it's above criticism but because the rating system is one of the

things being examined. The phallus organizes through judgment—the binary of having or not having, passing or failing, deserving the gold star or not. The pallus operates in a space where that binary doesn't apply. The value of the thing is not separable from the act of making it and offering it. The poem is not good or bad. The poem is a poem with a gold star on it left in a stranger's pocket by a woman who walked away without giving her name.

It was all there from the beginning. It was all in plain sight. She had been telling me the whole time. It's just shapes. It's all just shapes. On skin, on paper, on screens. Circles and triangles and squares and lines and stars and cats without mouths. The shapes do everything.

I just had to pick up the doll.

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