

A PHILOSOPHY OF TOYS (AFTER BAUDELAIRE)

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I found out the sex on a Tuesday as I drove to work. “It’s a girl!” said the genetic counselor and I started crying and had to pull off the interstate so I could sit with it for a minute before I called my husband who also cried. Undoubtedly, we were going to cry no matter what. It wasn’t the gender, exactly, but the way the gender points to the humanity of what was growing inside. Of course, as Judith Butler points out, this is the first thing we know about our children and this, she famously posits, is where the trouble starts.

It was this way for us. No pink clothes, no pink toys we said, assuming people would understand what we actually meant: do your best to leave gender out of it. As it turns out, this was not easy, especially if you want to accept gifts and hand-me-downs which—oh my god the onslaught of stuff that accompanies the arrival of a child in your home—we did.

Pink was shortsighted. Pink was putting it lightly. Pink was the tip of the iceberg. Purple is the new pink. Glittery eyeshadow and long fluttery eyelashes is the new pink. Glitter and shiny mermaid scales and rainbow unicorn manes and all manner of tulle.

My mother made sport of slipping in ruffles and skirts, coral and lavender, clearly delighted in following the letter of the law. “What?” she’d say, more and more lately like a child herself. “It’s not pink.” I spent our daughter’s first Christmas night fuming to my husband—nearly all of her gifts were gendered. A little baby doll called Plumpy in purple fur and painted on lashes, obscenely red mouth. My husband screeched its name for months whenever we caught sight of it.

Now, three years later, I realize it wasn’t the pink and its associated patterns and textures, which would come to colonize our house like a joyous alien froth, like being taken over by the softest, sweetest candy-colored overlords, but rather the decision itself, which my

daughter could not make as a baby (but has since made in braying fuschian declaration). It was the choice everyone was already making for her. What if she didn't want to be girlie? Or even a girl? I didn't want the gendering of everything she owned to feel oppressive to her, or to default her brain in a way that would later make her feel sad and invisible as a child. I had felt similarly equivocal about serving her meat as a baby. She needed the iron, but the boundless love she had for animals made my deception-by-omission hard to bear.

A beloved relative brought us a giant pink toy car that sang the alphabet: "I know what you said about pink but it was on sale." A grandpa gave her a red riding toy car, one that sang driving songs. The cars were the same brand, voiced by the same actor, but the pink car's voice was pitched higher, bubblier. The car chirped with birdsong and rainbows. The red car had a radio that played beats I actually liked. The pink car's wheels were decorative. It sat on the ground, unable to go anywhere. M lost interest in the pink car after a few minutes but she rode the red car all over the house. Poor pink car: pretty but useless.

Was I a gender Grinch? What was it about all this gendered material that bothered me? Somewhere, I'd read a millennial parent, younger than me, talk about gender as a celebration. That it was not about giving your children drab, Bolshevik clothes or minimalist toys (O the Montessori Instagrams I came to haunt! How beautiful the homes of these parents continued to appear—all that unstained pine, so unbranded and tasteful) but about incorporating the spectrum of gender expression into play. This person, I'm fairly certain, was the parent of a child gendered boy. I would feel the same way if I'd had a boy. Because while the girl stuff hurts my eyes and makes me feel like the world is trying to bury/drown/suffocate my daughter in her given gender, the boy stuff makes no bones about who is doing the burying. Camo, guns. Dumptrucks. Little soldiers. Even their dinosaurs are scarier. Sharks instead of dolphins. In his essay "A Philosophy of Toys," Baudelaire shows us the child, tiny philosopher, searching for the soul of his toy. This is the beginning of existential curiosity, he writes, but

it is also "the beginning of melancholy and gloom." Wandering the aisles of Target, I mark the place where the pink squeal of girl gives way to the sharp black edges of boy. It is like falling off of a rainbow into a hell pit. Where is the celebration? There is nothing here I want to borrow.

Deaths from gender reveal stunts are trending: today, the very day I sit down to write this paragraph, I google "gender reveal deaths" and find a story just fourteen hours old—the pilot and copilot of a plane crashed after flying an "It's a girl!" sign over a crowd of onlookers (one of whom reportedly said, "It's all good as long as it doesn't end up crashing into us," as they watched the plane fall into the sea). In February of this year, someone in Michigan died when he was hit by shrapnel from a cannon at a gender reveal party. The same month, a father-to-be died rigging an explosive device designed to reveal his baby's gender. And of course, there was the prepandemic El Dorado Fire in California, which killed a firefighter.

You might find my gender anxiety outsized or quaint. Even I kind of do looking back to those early months of M's life, especially since COVID has come along in the meantime to show us all how relatively small our daily worries were then.

But then again, to misquote that Gen X murder-epic of gendered oppression *Heathers*: My parental angst has a bodycount.

A friend who gifts me trash bags full of sparkly pastel toddler clothes, handed down from friends and colleagues to her own daughter, is sanguine. "It's more important for boys to learn to be like what we raise girls to be." She meant: caring, kind, vulnerable, able to name their emotions. She meant: it's not the pink that's the problem.

Part of my problem was surely generational. I am old enough to remember when boys and girls dressed alike (the delicious latent gayness of style icons Kristy McNichol, Jodie Foster, and Nancy McKeon), when, it seemed, not *all* toys were targeting specific genders

by default (and somehow, even tokenism seemed to appease the children and parents of the 1980s. See Smurfette and Huckleberry Pie. And of course, hidden queer histories abound: the original Care Bears were carefully, evenly gendered, with Funshine Bear making the transition from female to male in the early oughts relaunch. And who could forget the male sprites of the Rainbow Brite universe, especially Rainbow's own, Twink). All the boys I knew played comfortably in these realms almost thirty years before the term *Brony* would be coined.

Maybe it wasn't better, but it felt more egalitarian, born from the second-wave feminism that trickled down to my mother from the big cities. It was "Free to Be You and Me." Though things were definitely not egalitarian, they looked a little more that way. And I didn't like girly things. Dresses literally made me itch. I liked the sporty look of polo shirts and slightly belled rust-colored corduroys. I still do. When I wore girly clothing I felt costumed, not myself. When I played in the basement with the babysitters' sons, who took down their pants and rubbed up against me, or trapped me in false-front Sears cabinets and wouldn't let me out, I felt vulnerably othered. I didn't trust anything that marked me girl. I still don't. The patriarchy gets in so early—how much of my feeling about pink is misogyny, self-loathing? These days, my daughter loves to wear dresses and feel "fancy" and I find myself unclenching a little, becoming more femme under her influence. Because of course there is nothing wrong with pink, but there is a lot to unpack, both for myself, and for my daughter.

What I mean is, it wasn't really the pink itself; it was the feeling that she couldn't escape what it signified.

That I couldn't escape.

My husband, peaceful soul, remembers army men, GI Joes, Star Wars, not just a popular movie franchise but, in the '80s, also the nickname of Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative—an antinuke ballistic missile program that included, within its plans, the potential for space and earth laser battle stations. Very Robert Heinlein; very precursor to Space Force.

And what was it about my Barbie Dolls that begged to be burned and cut and pierced, dismembered? They were wanted; at some point I must have loved them. The first one had feathered hair and a pastel rainbow gown with a smocked bodice that was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I made her have so much sex. In the car, in the bedroom, on the kitchen floor. In threesomes and foursomes, little sister Skipper watching. There in the middle of my monotonous eight-year-old life: continuous orgies. Eula Biss reminds us that the Barbie Doll originated as a German sex toy. A joke you'd get the guest of honor at a bachelor party. Pocket prostitute. Did she want the sex? She lay there and Ken did things to her. So did I. I tore her arms off and showed them to her. I cut and dyed her hair and buried a safety pin deep in her cheek. Like Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* or the brother in A. M. Homes' rape fantasy "A Real Doll," there was something about Barbie I was being trained to want to destroy. While Claudia's destruction is self-preservation—a stand against Shirley Temple whiteness (a cuteness that obscures or perhaps makes palatable the lie of white supremacy), the brother's is the practice of toxic masculinity and the fantasy of domination. Mine was something in between the two. The lie I sensed I would be held to for the rest of my life. The desire to locate myself there anyway.

The child twists and turns his toy, scratches it, shakes it, bumps it against the walls, throws it on the ground. From time to time he makes it restart its mechanical motions, sometimes in the opposite direction. Its marvelous life comes to a stop. The child, like the people besieging the Tuileries, makes a supreme effort; at last he opens it up, he is the stronger. But where is the soul?

For a time, I dated a toy designer. Aaron came to me as a production assistant on cartoons, but we moved out of the city and our new town had a toy company and they gave him a job. His aesthetic was Rat Fink, Big Daddy Roth. Counterculture hot-rod stuff. He liked that I had a "Frank Frazetta look." He was thinking of becoming a car detailer and

he practiced by detailing our combo TVCR with mid-century swoops and diamonds. His toy company made the classics: Big Wheel, Suzy Homemaker. We broke up and I came to collect some things from the house whose rent I was still paying and he choked me on the front porch of that old downtown Victorian. I don't know how to describe what happened. First he was yelling and then his hands were on my neck. His hands were strong and one of the things I had admired about him. The fingers were square and always a little dark from work. Fingernails rimmed in paint and clay. His hands looked strong and they were, squeezing there. A small black tunnel opened in the center of my vision, invited me to step through. Something flickered and I remembered the iced coffee in my hand and dumped it onto his head. (Don't ask what would have happened without it.) This is not to claim causation. It's just that whenever I think very long about toys, I think about him, and this is where I start to get lost.

A boy approaches my daughter in the baby pool. M is at the height of her cuteness: fluffy chunk of toddler, huge eyes. Strangers at the grocery store, at the park, on the street say to us over and over again, "What a doll." The boy is five and wants to tickle my baby's belly, which sticks out in front of her. She is very interested in her belly right now, looking at it, fondling it, lifting up her shirts to show it to me. It is a glorious belly: easily mistaken for an invitation by another child. He puts his fingers on her belly and she looks at him from behind her usual, grumpy resting expression. Some alarm begins to ring, vaguely, deeply, inside of me. The boy gets closer and talks to her: "Hi baby, look at you, you can stand on one leg." He picks up her ankle underwater and sets one foot against the other leg, tree-pose style. Her face is ambivalent, but she is starting to make a small sound in her throat. The boy persists, leaning over my outstretched legs, to poke her hip and touch her thigh. The alarm rings louder. She draws closer to me and I tell the boy she doesn't want to be touched right now in as calm a voice as I can muster, though he is clearly a sweet boy, doesn't mean harm, and I am a grown-up, the authority here. My panic rises as he continues to lean over me, toward

my daughter, who is looking down now, pressing backward into my body, until his mother, busy with her other kids, notices and yells at him to back off. My daughter sinks into my lap and my arms encircle her. The boy splashes off in a frenzy. Perhaps for the first time in earnest since becoming a mother, I feel I've been tested and failed. I failed to protect her from the intruding boy. I failed to say no for her right away, before he was able to turn her into a doll. I failed because I have been socialized to be accommodating and avoid conflict. I failed because I've never really known how to be around children, how to talk to them, how to project an authority as adult that I've never felt and of which I've always been skeptical. I failed because I didn't want to make the boy uncomfortable as he touched my daughter. As he touched my daughter, I remembered how much I disliked being little because of all the boys and adults who touched me and touched me without my permission.

I had noticed, the week before, that she was the only girl in the passel of toddlers in her nursery room—this, I realized, is when the alarm had first blinked on. "Is it weird that I'm really uncomfortable with that?" I asked my husband. His alarm was a cold black eye sunk in his calm, measured depths. "They're just babies," he said and I wrestled with my discomfort until dinnertime.

The day after the boy at the pool, M bit a "friend" in daycare twice. The boy chased and cornered her. "It might be rough for a little bit," her caregiver tells my husband, "until she has her words." I think but don't say: it might be rough even after she has them. I want to take her out of daycare. I know this is impossible even as I say it. I know by the weight of my husband's silence that my fear seems outsized to him.

The babysitters' boys who led us into the basement and made us take down our pants so they could rub their penises on our vulvas. Who hit and kicked and grabbed us and locked us into cabinets. The babysitter who did the same. The father who hit. The tween son of my mother's friend, who locked us into a closet and pet my head into his lap. The adult neighbor who terrified me for no reason I could ever articulate. The hands of my classmates. I remember none of this

until a boy touches my daughter. The alarm arrives before the images that float up slowly, day after day, lazy ghosts. The websites are always telling you to follow your maternal instincts. But how do you know what is instinct and what is overreaction? Is any of it overreaction? How do I keep the world from touching my daughter? How could it be that this is something I have already failed to do?

In Christine Hume's essay "Consider the Sex Offender," she writes about sexual assault as a parasite—"My perpetrator left a parasite in me...Inevitably, I will act out the parasite's deep program." She fears she will subconsciously offer her daughter up for predation. I am beginning to wonder if just being a woman in this country is enough to play host to a worm.

I believe that generally children dominate their toys; in other words that their choice is determined by dispositions and desires, vague, if you wish, and by no means formulated, but very real.

I start with Baudelaire ("The toy is the child's earliest initiation to art, or rather for him it is the first concrete example of art . . .") and I find my way to Dave, my own first, personal, concrete example of art. Dave painted shapes in dark colors, gave them mythic names and sold them to rich people for hundreds of dollars. We lived in an artist's town where he worked at a gallery and I waited tables. This was after a brief and stressful stint as live-in help—servants, essentially—at the home of a wealthy couple farther up the coast. The couple began to demand more and more work from us so we snuck out of our studio apartment on their property in the middle of the night, loaded up Dave's VW Scirocco and ran. This was not the most organized season of my life.

Dave with his Doctor Who toys, who loved the number 23 so much he kept dating women that age. Eventually, it was all too much. When I told him I was leaving, he offered to drive me to work so we could talk about it, but there was work and here we were, driving on by. We

ended up at the dunes, all alone. He wanted to talk. He didn't say he was going to hurt me, but I remember, before we reached the sand, wondering what the road would do to me if I opened the door and leaped to meet it.

Don't think about The Lady of the Dunes, hands severed, nearly decapitated, famous unsolved mystery of the '70s. Don't think about Tony Costa, the serial killer, surname as common as Smith in these parts, or your boss's husband, who had known both Tony and the Susan who was one of Costa's victims. Had my boss's husband been questioned in the dunes murder? In my smeary memory, my boss's husband is driving me in his truck one day, home from work in the rain, and talking about murder, about talking to the cops, about dead Susans to the live one sitting next to him. But don't think about this. Or the violence all around you, all the time. The cocaine in the bar bathrooms, the fistfights. The way the straight restaurant workers of Provincetown sulk about homos and bitches and dykes. Don't think about Norman Mailer, wife-stabber, to whom you have recently served the weekly rib eye and whiskey sour. Don't think, just watch the ocean, the cliffs of sand, as they spiral out forever away from you, toward the shipwrecks and the old fishing settlement they called Helltown. Watch the piping plovers run fearfully just beyond the sucking reach of the tide.

Okay, I said, we're not breaking up but we have to talk. After my shift, okay? Okay? And he turned the car around and took me to work. The next day, while he worked, my boss's husband, with the murders and the truck, helped me move out my things. Dave called from work (who tipped him off? Small, sad town) and said he didn't want me moving out when there was the gun in the house. The gun that he was afraid I might take if he wasn't there to supervise me.

What gun?

My gun. The one I keep under our bed.

The one that had silently been with us all along in an innocuous beige box where I assumed he kept the things I kept in my boxes: ticket stubs, sea shells, old keys, flower cards. Bits of life.

He didn't have to say The gun I may decide to shoot you with. Some threats arrive fully formed in their thinginess. No language necessary. Maybe he had dated enough twenty-three-year-olds by then to understand how best to handle our whims.

I began to write this essay two summers ago, before a pandemic caused worldwide domestic abuse rates to skyrocket, before the week of Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery (after the founding of this nation and its police force on patriarchal and racist ideologies; after the previous fifty times this had happened, but still).

In the middle of the first week of protests, I find myself using toys to martial counterideologies. I abolish the police in M's Melissa & Doug town: I hide all her cop cars and her cops. I hide the painted wooden police station. I skip the page in her book where the friendly blond police officer approaches the Black father and his baby with her smiling German Shepherd. I take two of her dolls, one white and one Black, Baby Owie and Baby Owie Owie, respectively, and put them on the bed. Feeling like a white dummy, feeling clueless, I point to their arms, ask her what color their skin is. "Yellow," she says and points at Owie Owie, the Black doll. "Yellow," she says again and points at herself. I wince at the color blindness. Or rather, I wince at the feeling that I am about to ruin something for her. I tell myself the world is not color-blind, that there are other types of innocence. That Black kids deserve to be innocent too. I tell myself that the color blindness I was raised to value is a lie that kills. And anyway, yellow is her favorite color word this week; if I'd asked last week, she probably would have said purple. "No," I say, a pointless sort of regret pinging away inside me, "this baby has brown skin, and Baby Owie's skin is white. We say it's white. Your skin is white too." She seems to think about it, nods. She pulls up her shirt and puts her finger on her belly button then puts her finger on Owie Owie's belly button. "Mine," she says, meaning, I think, "Same as me." Owie, being a plastic head and limbs attached to a bean-filled cloth body, has no belly button.

"Yes—your skin is different but you both have belly buttons."

She nods again and leaves to collect her other dolls to inspect them for belly buttons.

Color is cultural, it's learned. Babies have to learn to differentiate between an unlimited number of hues in order to place them into a big group called "blue" for example, or "pink." Certain defining social ideas need to be learned first in order for us to understand the ways in which they are lies. As the deconstructionists preached, meaning comes to us via binary oppositions, and those oppositions are preloaded to be hierarchichal, unequal. Male/female, blue/pink, white/black.

The boy who touched my daughter at the pool wasn't white. I hadn't included the detail in my essay because I didn't think it mattered, but it matters.

I ask myself if I would have been less uncomfortable if the boy who touched my daughter in the pool was white. I don't think so, but it's possible. Perhaps it matters because I've used his guileless tenderness as a stepping-stone, to take the reader of this essay closer to some of the ways white men have hurt me. Narrative proximity to criminality. Language and how we wield it matters.

The second week of protests, I DMed with a friend who was scared for her brown teenage son. She told me about the ways he'd already begun to be singled out for criminality in their white neighborhood. Haunting the margins of our conversation was Amy Cooper, who—engaging in the long tradition of white women using the power of their whiteness to call killing authority down on Black men—had that week called the police on Christian Cooper, a Black bird-watcher in Central Park's Ramble, after he asked her to comply with the law and release her dog.

We also talk about a certain type of helicopter parenting, about our unease with it, how it cuts both ways. It's important to teach your kids to be safe and look out for themselves, but to be overprotective is damaging. All the science says. What the science doesn't say is that for those of us who grew up in the '70s or '80s, even the early '90s,

there wasn't always language for the assault and abuse you suffered. All too often there still isn't, of course, but childhood then was a reality unshared by adults; it was as if you commuted to your child's world every day, leaving the adults behind. Kids weren't primed to identify abuse and report it like they are now and adults turned away under the guise of minding their own business. One could read the tendency toward an overprotective culture in the 21st century as an answer to the underprotected one we lived through. Charges against contemporary overprotection can then be read as a veiled misogyny: Moms protect your daughters. But not like that, that's too much (and the unspoken problem: it makes them harder to get to).

But asking your children to protect themselves, to be safe, also asks that they imagine danger. What do they imagine? What do we encourage them to imagine? Though their abuse is more likely to be perpetrated by someone close to them, someone they have invited in, do we allow the danger to feel distant, in the name of protecting them, not scaring them? Who do they imagine might be waiting to do them harm? Remember George Stinney, the Scottsboro Boys, Emmett Till. Claudia Rankine's "racial imaginaries": Ashley Todd's carved a *B* into her cheek and told her to vote for Barack Obama. Susan Smith's murdered her children.

For the space of two months, my daughter is bullied at daycare by a small blond boy with the name of a mythological monster. She is older now, she can talk. She can say "stop" and "no" and does, but he hurts her anyway. One afternoon, fed up and powerless, she tries to throw away all the stuffed animals she has gendered male. I watch her give each one a final hug, and a kiss, and a look that expresses both regret and duty. She is doing something for herself here, on behalf of bullied girls everywhere. Purging the threat from her kingdom. I am uncomfortable with this whole situation. We work out a solution wherein the "boys" can stay if I degender them by telling them they are no longer boys. We make two piles. I cast many spells. We talk more about the concept of the nonbinary, which my daughter likes to discuss during these bully months, which I think gives her the inarticulate hope that there is something else beyond this in-group out-group violence.

In learning how to protect her and in teaching my daughter how to protect herself, I will also need to teach her how to unthink the imaginary. To deconstruct racial oppression, we also need to deconstruct gender.

I need the toy that will teach my white daughter how not to wield the power of the state against the brown boys of the world.

Maybe it's not the gender expression itself at all, but the ways in which gender becomes linked to violence so early on. The things that surround our children. The things that teach them desire.

It's not pink really—the color of vaginas and nipples, I mean of life and pleasure—but a fear I swallow every day, for my daughter and the myriad ways the world and I will turn her into a thing, and how she will, in turn, do the same to others.