

The Pachinko Marbles

Elisa Shua Dusapin

Novel

French



“Pachinko is a game for both groups and individuals.” This quotation from Roland Barthes opens Elisa Shua Dusapin’s most recent novel, *The Pachinko Marbles*. A group game because the arcades where pachinko – a Japanese variation on pinball – is played are full of rows of adjacent slot machines and an individual game because, when you play, you are intensely alone. The Swiss-Korean author uses this metaphor to tell a story; a story that tackles the issues of identity and otherness, through the prism of language and culture.

“When I use Japanese to talk about my grandparents, they feel like strangers to me.”

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Of French and Korean parentage, Elisa Shua Dusapin grew up in Paris, Seoul and Porrentruy in the canton of Jura. She graduated from the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel/Bienne, and in 2016 she published her first novel, *Hiver à Sokcho* (*Winter in Sokcho*, soon to appear in English), winner of a number of literary prizes, translated into several languages, and adapted for the theatre. Her second novel, *The Pachinko Marbles*, has already been awarded a Swiss Literature Award.

Photo: Romain Guélat

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Excerpt translated by Hyunmin Park

I see a crescent moon rising, horizontally. I am always surprised that in Japan the moon looks as if it is sleeping, while in Switzerland it's standing upright. I tell Mieko this. She twists her neck to look at the moon from another angle.

"Are you excited about going to Switzerland?" I ask.

"Mum says it's for my future."

"How about you? What do you think?"

"I don't know. There's still lots of time before I go..."

"When are we going to Pachinko?"

"I'm not sure if we'll have time," I murmur.

"But the summer holidays are almost over!"

I tell her we'll see. Her chin puckers. I worry she may start crying so I quickly change the subject, and say softly, "When I was little, I wanted to analyse chlorophyll."

She looks at me, puzzled. I explain what chlorophyll does, that it helps a plant breathe, as haemoglobin in our blood helps us breathe. They even look similar, with four atoms surrounding one atom. The only difference is that the centre of chlorophyll is magnesium while that of haemoglobin is iron.

"I thought if humans succeeded in breaking down chlorophyll, extracting the magnesium and transplanting it to a blood cell, we would only need to expose our bodies to sunlight to produce oxygen. I thought doing that could be a career. That's what I wanted to do."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I realised I could also create an atom bomb by splitting atoms."

Mieko looks thoughtful, then asks: "Actually, how old are you?"

"Thirty. Well, almost."

"Thirty! I'm ten."

"I know," I reply, annoyed.

"When's your birthday?"

"Soon."

"How soon?"

"August the 20th."

She starts counting on her fingers, suddenly excited, without letting on why.

The baseball player has left. The field glows under the arc lights, deserted now. Bright artificial daylight. The wind gets up. We can see the various train stations in Tokyo, with the trains passing through – some on elevated tracks, others at ground level.

"Don't you think the trains look like fish?" asks Mieko.

"Maybe. Some do."

"Do you know," she goes on, "a very long time ago, the ocean covered the Earth? Fish could swim everywhere, even to the top of this building. That's why my dad wanted his trains to look like fish. Or dragons. Dragons evolved from fish."

She laughs.

"But there are also trains that look like snails – like trams – or some that look like earthworms, like the metro. But those are not my dad's."

I tell her that the Shinkansen is the fastest train in the world, that she can be proud that people can go so far so fast thanks to her father. She replies that she hates her father, that he built these trains so he could escape from her and her mother. She stands up and folds our towels in an unusually angry way.

"I'm hungry," she declares. We go back in.

She wants an omelette. Her mother has prepared everything. The refrigerator is full of quail and chicken eggs from Family Mart, scrambled, in salads or square omelettes. There is even a fried egg, vacuum-sealed in a transparent bag, with a bulb-shaped yolk. I take out one of the pre-packed omelettes. Mieko shakes her head. She wants to make her own from scratch.

"Are you sure?"

This was not part of my instructions.

"Yes, I know how," she said, breaking an egg on the rim of the frying pan.

I watch her anxiously. The egg white trickles down the shell and over Mieko's fingers, like the way people drool when they're asleep. I don't touch raw eggs anymore, after the day I came across a chicken embryo in one. I finger the pre-packed omelette through the packaging. It looks like a sponge. When I press it, a yellowish liquid comes out, which goes in again when I take my finger off. Meanwhile, Mieko, having beaten at least ten eggs, turns on the gas.

"Mom says I have to get used to foreign food. She says when all my cells have been reconstituted by the new food, I'll be ready to go."

I take this opportunity to ask if she knows why her mother wants to be called Henriette, although it's probably not her real name. Mieko shrugs.

"Because of Heidi, I think."

"Heidi?"

"Both begin with the same letter."

Soon the eggs splutter and explode softly, sprinkling yellow flakes around us. Mieko catches one and stuffs it into her mouth.

"It's good. It's crunchy."

After the meal, she asks me to help her take a shower. She takes off her clothes, rolls them into a ball and throws them into the sink. There isn't enough room for two in the bathroom. I sit on the toilet and discreetly look at the floor. I haven't seen a girl's body since I've become an adult. Although the bathroom is already hot, Mieko turns up the water full blast. We're soon blanketed in steam. I give her a sideways glance. She's scrubbing herself with a bath glove. Her skin is perfectly smooth, her arms so slight that I want to take hold of them for fear that they might fall off. Her shoulder-blades are tapered like fins. The soap doesn't lather. I think about Henriette's dry skin, telling myself that they need a more moisturizing and less abrasive product. When Mieko closes her eyes to wash her face, I look at her full on. Her breasts haven't developed yet: just two areolas, barely dark, two drops of water on paper. Maybe she won't need a bra, even when she's grown up: just like her mother.

I was only a year older than her when mine started to grow. My grandmother looked at my bulges, before pressing down on them with her thumbs, as if she was pushing them back inside me, as if they had no right to be there. Just before the holidays, my mum bought me a bra so tight that it hurt. I felt ashamed. I hid in the bathroom to massage my breasts, aware that the door didn't have a lock and afraid that my grandmother could come in at any moment without knocking.

The humidity makes it hard to breathe. I brush the hair glued to my temple and adjust the skirt stuck to my thighs. Mieko hasn't finished soaping herself, so I go out and wait in the living room.

I explore the library. Between two copies of *Pléiade*, I find a translation of *Heidi* in French. The text is sprinkled with annotations in Japanese, in green, like blades of grass someone's put between the pages to dry. They're almost illegible. Some quotes stand out. In one, the eagle speaks to the villagers from high in the sky: "If you lived less huddled together, if each of you followed your own path and, like me, ascended to the heights, you would be happier!"

In another, the goatherd's grandmother confides to Heidi, "When the wind blows, it blows through the whole house. Everything clatters and bangs. Nothing can withstand the wind. At night, when everyone is sleeping, I tremble with fear the house could collapse on top of us. No one can fix things in this house. Not even Peter."

I feel uncomfortable and put the book back in its place. A brochure falls from the last page. Heidi Village. I open it. A theme park based on the animated cartoon *Heidi* made by Studio Ghibli. It's in Yamanashi district, near the Hokuto hills, two hours from Tokyo. I put the brochure on the coffee table, my eyes lingering on the shelf reserved for children's books. Colourful rectangles and squares. The titles are unfamiliar to me, except for *Ernest and Celestine*. I've read this one too, I think, as I open it.

Watercolors. Beige ink wash. Big Ernest looks smaller than I remember. Celestine, by contrast, looks taller. They put up a tent in the forest, and soon the tent is occupied by a homeless person. I'm surprised at how few words there are compared to the number of pages. When my mother read it to me, she seemed to talk for much longer. Celestine went to school and read books that retold stories from history. Ernest fell in love with a white she-bear he met in a cold land. I can't find any of this tonight, neither in the words nor the drawings. Did my mother invent the stories? I asked her to read slowly to check whether her words matched the words in the book. But I didn't know how to read. And when I learned how to read, I read other things.

I've got to the end already. The homeless person departs, leaving gifts for his unknown hosts. I close the book. A bear and a little mouse. A strange couple. Actually, Celestine must have been an orphan because her mother was devoured by a cat. Now that I think about it, doesn't Ernest's back, broad and hunched, testify to the weight of an underlying sadness – from which he released Celestine as he took her home? I'd never asked that question before now.

The sound of wet feet makes me raise my head. In her mother's bathrobe, Mieko comes up next to me. She points to the Heidi Village brochure.

"I went on a school trip there. It's boring."

"I would like to go."

"I'm telling you. It's for little kids."

She takes a big breath and then lets it out in gasps.

"Are you having trouble breathing? I often see you doing this with your mouth."

She shakes her head and says she's fine. Then, noticing *Ernest and Celestine*, asks,

"Can you read that to me?"

I go back to the beginning but she points to a page in the middle.

"I prefer here."

We turn off the lights, keeping only one wall light on, next to the sofa. As I read, I feel Mieko lean against my hips, getting heavier and heavier. She falls asleep on my lap. Henriette comes back and finds us like this. I hadn't moved, I didn't want to wake Mieko. When I get up to go, Mieko waves a hand at me, from a distance, like Celestine to Ernest from the tent, in the glow of a flashlight.