
Emmanuelle Pagano

Childish Hands

Publisher: P.O.L

Date of Publication: August 2008

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BIOGRAPHY Emmanuelle Pagano was born in 1969 in the Aveyron. Mother of three, she now lives in the Ard che where she teaches plastic arts.

PUBLICATIONS *Les Adolescents troglodytes*, P.O.L, 2007; *Le Tiroir   cheveux*, P.O.L, 2005; *Pour  tre chez moi*,  ditions du Rouergue, 2002 (under Emma Schaak); *Pas devant les gens*, La Martini re, 2004.

At first sight this pleasant, quite charming title appears to promise a fine poetic, childhood-filled tale. However, the story of *Childish Hands* is nothing but horrifying. It is the story of a girl who, throughout an entire school year, is daily and systematically raped by all the boys in her class—all but one.

Time has passed and now she is the housekeeper of one of her former torturers. She writes a journal to help her overcome this history that is at the same time a collective secret, but she doesn't succeed, always comes back to it, and even goes so far as to suggest to her employer that he give a party for all their former class mates.

One by one, four characters who, consciously or not, carry the secret are going to let us assess its implication. They are all women, women who have kept silent although they should have spoken up, or who don't know but are suspicious, understanding especially inside their bodies, through their bodies, that something, some unmentionable presence, surrounds them.

Through very skillful and deeply moving streams of consciousness, Emmanuelle Pagano reveals the secret and at the same time describes its concealment, which she does in a marvelous and implacable language that is both precise and sensual.

The journal

No ... that's not right ... start over.

I reread it from the beginning. I shouldn't make a single mistake. I'm not his secretary but it's the middle of the night and she's not here, so I need to do the work. It's always the same story when he prepares his files, last minute like this, at midnight or one in the morning. He wakes me up. There are no children so there's no excuse. There are no children, how convenient. I type, badly.

It's addressed to the the Departmental Director of Facilities and I don't know the proper business format. He ends with 'I am ... yours sincerely ... bla-bla-bla,' which I must somehow translate. Perhaps I should write the same thing as I did to the French Commission for the protection of the historic and rural heritage. How should I know. His files all look alike. Same goes for what he writes. One after another, and I am so bored. I don't know how to be polite. I don't know the aloof language of distant relationships. I feel like writing 'bla-bla-bla' but I fear his reaction, his contempt.

He might become quite angry finding me so familiar, as usual. True enough, I never know the appropriate distance to keep, not in words, not in meters. Distance between people. Apparently people have to be kept at a distance. Domestic help in particular, otherwise they'll take liberties.

How I'd love to take some liberties.

"Start over."

I smell his sleepless breath, replete with coffee and ill-digested resentment. Or maybe it's me. Perhaps I've become so embittered that everything disgusts me. I look up, he's right above me, his hair encrusted and disheveled.

His head is dirty. Not dirty with dirt. Dirty with men's products. I'm beginning to find him intolerable. Lotions, colognes, things to make his hair grow, get rid of the dandruff. And yet, I used to love him, I do love him, but sometimes something about him lingers with me, smarting. I already have an incredible ear ache in my right ear.

Her, I look at her with words that won't come to me.

I'd like to.

He forbids me. I'd like to help her, no, not even, I'd like to be in her place. I'd like to be her.

But for him, impossible. He snickers.

My ear hurts, a grinding pain now. It hurts constantly. I hurt everywhere I am. Inside, outside, wherever I go, even with headphones and music to calm me down. It's almost as if it grates at my every motion. Sometimes an amplified buzzing, depending upon my position. An unbearable murmuring sound inside the grinding. Within the pain there exists a noise. A cyclical, deep noise. And I feel something clawing at the murmur, clawing at the inside of my ear.

I watch her go with a toothbrush from one faucet to another. She scrubs and smiles to herself.

Every now and then she watches me watching her and smiles again, but more broadly, for me.

I feel awkward and prepare to leave but she says, no, stay, there's no harm done in watching. I don't want to, no, that's not it, I don't want to check up on you. She smiles again, it doesn't matter, she understands.

He forbids me to do any housework. I'm not allowed. No laundry, nothing, barely any cooking, only when company is coming. Because that's how it's done, the lady of the house lays out the menu for distinguished guests.

A master's house.

My husband is the last proprietor of the most important vineyard of the canton, maybe even of the administrative department. Anyway, I don't know anything about it, he despises me enough for that.

After him, no one, end of the line. Eighty-four hectares, a long line of curves, hills, some that I've yet to walk across. I see the pines in the distance, assume there are chestnut trees, too, even farther away. I don't know where the boundaries of the property are. The *Pierre Mauve* domain, mauve stone because of the glow of the rising sun in autumn with its strange colors everywhere, on everything, on the stones, the people, the workers' cars at dawn, the veins of the vine leaves, and the wrinkles of the seasonal farmhands; a rising sun reserved specifically for the fields right here, which doesn't exist outside the village, you'd almost think the sun doesn't rise the same way anywhere else.

I always get up too late to see it.

I'm ashamed of being here without any children, any chores, in a clean and empty home. Irritated, he reminds me that I am running the house. To me, running the house means nothing other than pressing myself irreverently against a load-bearing wall and irritating him even more, he who'd like to see me going after the staff, restricting, even insulting them.

He talks to me about his mother's iron grip.

He talks to me about the distance that must be observed.

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Besides the employees of the estate and the seasonal workers who are outside, I have only her. Inside I have only her as a servant and I can say nothing bad about her.

She is beyond reproach.

I would like to be her. He endlessly repeats that he doesn't ask much of me, saying I should just run the house, but that I can't even manage that.

I steady myself against a wall. It's not the house I keep, nor does it support me. I know what he means. He wants me to uphold my status, my status as wife, my status as the wife of a great property owner. Status and name.

My husband is extremely attached to the name, to the passing on of knowledge, to the winegrowing tradition, but also to the mastery of new technologies. Status, name, land, science and technology. Prestige, color, I should carry them in the manner that I walk, hold myself, talk. I should keep what he calls my distance.

I have taken his name. The expected name. But the attitudes, the postures—I have such trouble embracing them.

I don't use make-up except under threat, his threat. I dress poorly. Women's magazines bore me. I don't dress badly, it's just that I dress without thinking about it.

He would like me to spend my days thinking. No, not thinking. Just paying attention to my thickening waist size, counting calories, taking care of my appearance, rather than thinking about nothing, as he says. What he calls thinking about nothing is my musing over a thousand things by the French window. When I spend hours without any visible activity. When I wind and unwind and rewind thoughts he can't make head or tail of from afar because they are serpentine, they're digressive. But I no longer confide in him. I'm done. I keep my serpents to myself.

I would like to stretch them out, jot down phrases to keep them from endlessly rewinding but I don't really know how to go about that. I'm at loose ends.

I often use a walk in the vineyards as a pretext to stroll for as long as the knotted thread of my thoughts needs it. Walking for a long time keeps my thoughts from whirling back on themselves, allows them to be fixed through some

unknown ink-less writing mystery. As if walking were writing. As if my steps were printing words somewhere, but where I don't know, not in the soil of the vineyards, but in some invisible matter around me that is strangely supportive of my memory. Something inside me must go outside. I walk, the rosebushes at the end of the rows flutter in the autumn wind, I lay out my thoughts, they no longer rewind, they have been written, inscribed, and I remember them. Coming and going through the rows of vine stocks, changing lines and colors, toward the west on one side and toward the east when I go back, sun before me, sun behind me and, like swimmers doing laps, I turn after I've made the rounds of the rosebushes cooled down by the wind. Coming and going inside its colors, rows of scent that changes with the season, the hour, and the wind, thinking like back-and-forth thinking, in the air, outside. Besides, everything outside is so much more comfortable. I'm not supposed to budge inside. I'm supposed to keep my distance inside, as my husband says, sit straight, motionless, and above all not talk too much. Not think too much. Not do too much. Don't do too much, please, my overwrought husband often requests in a very low, extremely tight voice, as if held on a leash by its desire to crack. I cannot take care of my own space, in my own home, since he forbids me to do it. I cannot occupy my own space, my own body, since he forbids me to clean.

She does that.

I don't know if cleaning for other people is the same thing. I watch her and she continues to be an enigma in jeans.

I'd like to be like her. Wearing jeans she doesn't change for a whole week, with a filled notebook in her back pocket. So, doing housework is writing, too. I knew it. Taking care of the time and space around you, being aware of the body and space and time it occupies. Having a place.

She comes two or three times a week, depending on the need, depending on my husband's demands. Since I, he says repeatedly, can't even be bothered making any demands.

The rest of the week she puts in hours at the *Ensoleillée*, the village retirement home. It's a semi-nursing home in the renovated former middle school, completely done over for the elderly, overlooking the elementary school, still the same one and barely renovated in twenty-five years.

My husband's school.

The old people must love spying on the school's playground, hunching in armchairs in the lounge—overheated in the winter and too sunny in the summer—in front of the bay window that looks out over the playground where the little ones spray their disorderly mood around and occasionally turn to make

faces at them from a distance.

Between these two generations is a forty-year old staircase of reinforced cement that, nevertheless, is threatening to fall apart.

She conscientiously scrubs the handles of the faucets with a toothbrush, she has all the time in the world, and in that conscientiousness, that time, she picks words, picks meanings, strange meanings, foreign meanings even.

She arranges them. They make folds, tightly packed, un-ironed, in the back pocket of cheap jeans.

I read the notebook last week. She'd taken it out of her pocket to make room for the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner before going to the next floor. It was in the cupboard with the rest of the household materials.

I read it because one day I happened to ask her whether she used it to keep the house organized, our house being quite large, and that made her laugh so uproariously that it intrigued me.

She disappeared on the stairs and as I rummaged through the cupboard, since my husband asks me to check and make sure she doesn't put things aside in her bag (to steal them later), I found the notebook. I started reading, read through it, and it was so unexpected that I clutched it against me, took it away, and so it was I who stole from my housekeeper.

Kind of hard-core porn poems is what they were.

I took them into the garden.

I had a terrible ear ache and thought that maybe a bit of fresh air and some reading ...

I sat down with the notebook in the shady hollow of the maple trees.

The shade was disrupted by rays of sun that fluctuated with the wind.

The sun really irritated me enormously, but in the notebook it was darker, at least. These were not romantic schoolgirl poems about sunsets or assorted flowers. The words were as dense and harsh as her unappealing face, as moist as her blue eyes. Slopes, stones, dirt paths, a separate, entire world inside her notebook. Little paths, footpaths almost, which smelled bad, smelled of bad memories. Deletions and corrections, and a language and grammar, newly invented with each sentence, that talked about insistent hands, childish hands, and genitals with close-stitched labia, a very young girl's genitals, with spiky hair, a chestnut husk protecting its much too immature fruit, tiny labia buried under silk threads, woven through the pubic hair by tamed caterpillars.

Sheer madness.

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