



# Not even the sound of a river

(Pas même le bruit d'un fleuve)

Hélène Dorion

Excerpt translated by  
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**Published March 2020**



## HÉLÈNE DORION

Hélène Dorion has published over thirty works (novels, poetry, essays) for which she has received numerous literary awards such as the prix Mallarmé, the Governor General's Literary Award, the Prix Anne-Hébert, the University of Montreal's Études françaises magazine award, and the Léopold-Senghor award.

Her books have been translated and published in over fifteen countries and, in 2012, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France has paid tribute to her career. Discover her universe : [www.helenedorion.com](http://www.helenedorion.com)

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## Synopsis

When, going through her mother's effects, Hanna finds some notebooks, she decides to travel down the St. Lawrence River to try to find the thread that could tie her life to Simone's, the silent woman who was absent from her own life. Along the river, Hanna finds out about Antoine, her mother's true love, and learns about the sinking of the Empress of Ireland in 1914. She discovers how personal tragedies that affect generations sometimes arise from a catastrophe, and how the survivors themselves can be shipwrecked. Along the journey, the power of art and friendship help shed light on her quest.

Rights held: World

## Excerpt

How many days will we live?

The question is as blunt as it is incongruous. If we avoid it, the years can trickle by without our seeing them. At the end, nothing would remain but hours that have glided by like water flowing into a river, into the sea, leaving no trace of this passage.

I don't think my mother ever asked herself that question. Each day for her seemed to be an exercise in survival. Between the times when I saw her carrying

out the household chores, the ones when she appeared joyful with her friends, and the others when she and my father were at war, she would sometimes stop, stare into a void as if into another place that swallowed her up. If I tried to speak to her then, I'd come up against her absence. Simone's face would become a stranger's; it was no longer my mother who was there, but an unknown woman. Even today, I cannot say I know the whole story. But do we ever know the entire truth about our parents?

Kamouraska, 1949

*To live is to follow the traces of the child  
that you were*

At this point in the river, no shore appears on the horizon. You could speak of *the sea*. Here, storms conceal the sky, and sometimes even our dreams.

Like trees whose branches are inextricably entangled grow while imprisoning other trees, every story cuts a path between life and death. You never entirely make out the roots and points of wavering that cause the story to break. Or else it does not break and draws near to the stars that illuminate it slightly. We are not very different from forests scattered with tall trees similar to heaps of bones that defy the sky that from one moment to the next can break apart.

Our roots run beneath the ground, invisible, impossible to unearth them all. We can try to pull one out, hope it will lead us to another that we can extract as well, and so on until we perceive a meaning in this story that we call *our life*.

Simone advances without hesitating into the icy water. She knows that there is no sill; you can only enter suddenly. Her feet sink into the cold sand; she braves the first waves and advances again, until the water comes up to her hips. Then she dives. Only after a long while does she come to the surface to breathe.

How long does a night last, she wonders, letting herself glide through the dark water. Nothing frightens those who have lost everything. The sea becomes a cage of darkness. But Simone fears neither the cold nor the darkness that will perhaps persist. Soon her hands will touch the algae and mud; she goes back down and thinks she rediscovers the painting hanging in her family's living room that she looks at so often, persuaded that it, *Dream of Depths*, teaches her to better see and understand the movements of life she struggles against, shapes that dissolve, immediately recreating new ones — that is how you paint, how you should live, she tells herself staring into the vast despair that shifts inside her and slowly swallows the entire blue.

Simone likes these moments when she feels her body go numb. Since water does not know time, it ceases to pass. She closes her eyes and mechanically synchronizes the movement of her arms with that of her head, which turns to the right and then to the left; she breathes at the moment her arm reaches just above the water and returns to slap against the waves.

She swims, and as long as she swims, she tells herself, you cannot drown. She likes to feel that each sequence distances her thoughts a little more, for you don't think when you're swimming. There are too many worlds — the tumult and beauty, the void that grabs at you and a fullness that nourishes — too many worlds for thoughts to be able to interfere.

How long does a night last?

The tide is high, the waves strong. But Simone doesn't see them, she swims, her legs beating out a regular rhythm, and when a wave appears the minute she opens her mouth to breathe, she effortlessly spits back the saltwater tasting of tears, tastes the void that no sea can drown. She swims — there is no shore to reach, she tells herself; it is good to be free for a while, to no longer struggle against the jostling currents, waving her arms and kicking her legs without thinking, trusting in the hand of time that keeps on turning, regardless of what happens. Unless that is what living is: entering the current without bypassing the reefs and the shallows, without avoiding the stones that the tide will soon hurl upon the shore? The sky is sometimes a consolation; when no black bird scratches the surface, the blue becomes a refuge where the earth tells of itself, and

*sometimes it appears moved  
that we listen to it so well,  
then it reveals its life  
and says no more.*

Simone looks up. Through the mist that ripples above the water, she thinks she sees something, a small boat or perhaps a rock, one of those rocks difficult to discern that graze the hulls of reckless boats.

Toward what island am I drifting, she wonders. An island where you no longer really exist, where you seek a point of light in the middle of the night, a source toward which you are drawn, a shore that could be a beginning of the world or our own existence, the nothingness that strikes nothingness and begets millennia, a few atoms in the hollow of nothingness, and that suffices for life to begin.

She closes her eyes, stops moving her arms, as if to see if the water's kindness will be able to carry her. Can she float not knowing where the wind comes from and where the tide is headed?

Lying on her back, arms stretched out sideways, open like light sails on the water's surface, head immersed, Simone now hears only the muffled sound of the world. It is the sound of memories, torn sails, broken masts, too-high waves that crush ships. She begins to spontaneously recite a poem that she copied out in a notebook:

*Free man, you will always cherish the sea!  
The sea is your mirror; you contemplate your soul  
In the infinite unfolding of its wave,  
And your mind is not a less bitter abyss.*

The current carries her to the open sea, or else it is clouds are flowing in a darkened river, a fluid architecture, birds gliding like flotsam in a sky of storms and ruins.

What do you feel, she wonders, when water goes up your nose and goes down into your stomach; what do you feel when it slides through your entire body and suffocates you until you choke? At what point do you know it's too late, that you can no longer return? And how to imagine that the sometimes still majestic river can suddenly become a poison in the mouths of its victims?

Simone abandons herself to the uncertain landscape, but a stronger wave jostles her. When her body begins to slip into darkness, she arches her back, heaves herself up and turns onto her back. Eyes open, she looks at the sky filled with foam, tells herself that the night will not end; the sound of memories will trouble her a long time still. This sky holds no promise. Simone no longer feels her arms or legs; she lets herself drift, hoping to wind up on a reef.

Montreal, 2018

*Returning*

*(Where you describe your chase, your journey,  
your harvest, your origin)*

I have always hated the smell of chlorine. When I was a child, my parents forced me, all summer long, three times a week, to take swimming lessons that began at seven-thirty in the morning. I would already be shivering when I arrived at the neighbourhood pool. On those days, I would wake up feeling nauseous, unable to eat anything before getting on my bicycle, tottering, terrorized at the idea of having to slip in that water still cold from the night air. I had to learn how to float, swim on my stomach, back, and sides, kick my legs and arms or stretch them out as far as possible and bring them back slowly, controlling my breathing to coordinate it with the movement of my body. In the middle of summer, an entire class was devoted to lifesaving techniques. It was the worst morning. For hours, the instructor pretended to drown, and each child in turn had to jump into the water to free her from the stranglehold that, in other

circumstances, could truly proved fatal. That night I had nightmares. I saw my mother in the open sea, waving her arms in all directions while I remained motionless on the quay, feet transformed into long roots tied to the wooden planks. Or I was choking under the weight of the water closing in above my head. I felt the power of the current sucking me toward the bottom, little pockets of air bubbles creating strange shapes as they burst from my mouth. Then everything went black.

Each time the smell of chlorine rises to my nostrils, those horrible summer mornings resurface. They carry images of my body sinking into an abyss until it touches a rough bottom. My eyes are closed, my mouth about to open, my heart beginning to beat so loudly that I may not be able to rise back up to the surface and return to the light that appears so far away; I can scarcely make out a shimmer, a shaft of light through which I could pull myself away from the predator.

One day I saw my mother enter the sea as if she were embracing the body of a loved one, as if the violent blows of the waves against her hips were those of a lover to whom she abandoned herself. For her, the water was not glacial; the sun was not burning her skin. The wind swept through her hair, revealing the beauty of her features and forcing her to plant her feet more deeply into the sand. Was she looking for something at the end of the void, was she waiting for the sea to throw up debris that reappeared on the surface like the sound of memories? My mother then became unknown to me once more. After a long while, Simone turned around and returned to the beach, face wet with tears and foam, her body exhausted, broken by a strange confrontation with herself.

You probably never fully know the faces that are nearest. They remain enigmas, despite the years we shared with them in an intimacy that may never be recreated. Those present since our birth, those who were there with us for our first steps, our first words, and our first falls as well, remain unfinished mosaics.

At times perhaps you manage to grasp a few fragments that bring a part of the shape into focus, modify another. Their faces, which erase as we approach, then begin to take shape a little more clearly. You hear the murmur of their lives, the threads and bonds of which they had concealed, obscured the heavy shadows and kept doors half closed. You hear the infinite swaying of their world up to our own, like a tide carrying with it unknown pieces of our own story, the swell of events we did not suspect. And at times, strange faces fill in a few of the gaps from which the meaning of that shape, both simple and complex, escaped – a father, a mother – who gave us life



The sting of doubt, the heart of things to delve into — can I catch the missing piece of a life abandoned like the old shell of a crab that had to molt to go on?

*The world of childhood is a hanging gondola  
waiting for something to happen*

The times my mother remained seated, silent, appearing lost in thought, I did not imagine that she could be suffering. There were so many other times when she spoke, laughed, moved about in every direction to finish one thing or begin another, I could only guess that, well before I was born, a bomb had burst open inside her. The pain had spread to her heart, her stomach, her head and her eyes, and had never come back out.

One day, my mother told me: *If you didn't cry, Hanna, I'd forget to feed you!* At the time I'd found it funny; she must have meant to let me know how good I was being, but today, I don't know. In what house, in what life was she living then?

Simone forced herself to merely survive, to get through the days by fulfilling her obligations as a mother, her duties as a wife, and by assuming her responsibilities as a daughter and a sister. Today I believe that she had but one wish: to reach the end of her journey. But I didn't tell myself that. I could not and did not want to see it.

When she had to face her death, she did not try to postpone it. Extending her life was out of the question. She would have had a fit of rage, would have resisted, taken one last look at the happy moments, the people dear to her, the beauty of the sky in the early morning when she arose before the others to watch the day rise by the window, but nothing could have held her back; there wasn't even any sadness to prompt her to delay the time of leaving.

As soon as she met with the doctor, Simone was clear: Don't do anything to extend my life. I was with my friend Juliette in the hospital room when my mother uttered those words. I couldn't believe she didn't want to try anything, that nothing and no one could make her want to remain a few months or weeks more, if it were possible.

When she returned home, I suggested we go to Kamouraska; I knew how much she loved the maritime landscape where she had grown up. Of course she didn't speak of it, never referred to the past; it was my father who for a long time filled in the holes in the story. *What did my grandfather do for a living, Adrien, do you*

*remember?* He would tell us of summers by the river in the village where their friends were; that's how they met, how they began seeing one another, he and my mother.

Simone seemed to have forgotten so many things about her own life, but perhaps she did not want to remember.

She refused to return to Kamouraska. I suggested that a nurse come with us put her mind at ease. I would have rented a spacious and comfortable car; we would have taken the Route des Navigateurs that runs along the river. Already, crossing the Quebec bridge, she would have seen Lévis, the city where she'd hated living when Adrien declared bankruptcy and was forced to sell their luxurious condo in Sainte-Foy. For an upper-middle-class woman from Quebec City's Upper Town, living on the South Shore was a something to be ashamed of; she so resented my father for having forced her to live in a place that was *neither city nor suburb*, and how she hated the four-room apartment overlooking a parking lot whose lighting ruined every evening. She never invited her friends over during the four years she endured that exile. I've lost my bearings, she would say; I no longer feel at home. But in reality, she had never been happy anywhere.

Coupled with the shame of living in Lévis was fear, because now she had to cross the bridge to reach the city, the *real* city, the one where her friends lived, where she liked to stroll and go shopping. But the bridge added to the danger of driving, especially in winter; she was already afraid of so many things: accidents, illness, in fact she seemed to be on the look-out for any possible fractures of existence, the moment when the dyke gives way, when the dam cracks, and the slightest movement in that direction threw her into a state of stupor, the depths of which amazed me each time.

My mother did not want to go over her life journey in reverse; the ice could have given way, the fog lifted. She would have lost sight of the horizon, and with it, death.

Today I know it was primarily for myself that I wanted to go on this journey. To spend a few days alone with her, to join her in her silence, and for her to join me in mine. I wanted to enter my mother's field of vision, for her to enter her daughter's, for us, one last time, to attempt to feel the connection, and for the painful sensation that being with her was like being with a stranger to subside.

I so would have liked to drive with my mother, even in silence. That silence would have become our words; we would have been together as we never had before, would have watched the names of villages pass by — Cap-Saint-Ignace, L'Islet-sur-Mer, Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Rivière-Ouelle, and finally Kamouraska, the shores of her youth.

We could have perhaps continued to L'Isle-Verte and Rimouski, across from the other shore of the St. Lawrence

River where we had gone so often when I was little; we would have rediscovered our memories in Baie-Saint-Paul and Les Escoumins, where one autumn day a cousin of hers invited us aboard his fishing boat to go whale watching in the open waters. My mother remained crouched in a corner of the small boat; I went to join her. Huddled against her, I pretended to be afraid; it brought us together. She told Adrien she had to stay with me, that I was terribly afraid of the water. It was not entirely false; I had almost drowned when I was five. We were at the seashore; my parents were distracted, perhaps they were quarrelling again on the beach, and during that time I almost stopped breathing beneath the wave that had just carried me away. Until a hand lifted me up. My father had run into the water, grabbed me by my cotton sweatshirt that had become too heavy.

My mother had almost no appetite anymore, but I would have suggested we go to small restaurants along route 132, and we would have found a motel along the river. In the mornings, we would have strolled along the beach, breathing in the smell of kelp and saltwater; perhaps she would have looked out into the distance, and with her I would have observed the expanse of her life that had become erased the way a horizon disappears after looking at it for hours. Perhaps she would have spoken to me of her childhood and her youth, of those years full of possibility to her, all the paths that suddenly become clear so you don't know which to choose — which setting to embrace: the sea to learn of storms or the forest to discover the undergrowth.

How many days do we have to see the people who gave us life through their entire beings, and not only through an angle that reduces them to being *that father*, *that mother* that they were? How long will they have to join us, to look at us the way we hope, that will tell us a bit about what we are and validate our existence?

Strolling along the river, Simone might have spoken of the time when she became my mother, of when my father died, and I would have asked her why she never left him, despite the constant tension, the sometimes violent conflicts. Why hadn't she left, with or without me, and what was she thinking of on those nights, motionless at the window awaiting his return? The absent one, those days tormented by incessant quarrelling, suffering in silence, as vast as a river become an ocean — everything closed again before her.

That road of time she had not wanted to go down. No more road, no more horizon. As if she could not

distance herself from her death. It was no longer the time to go elsewhere. Especially not toward the past. My mother told me: *No*. Explaining nothing, just a *no* closing off the rest.

Eight weeks later, she carried away everything, starting with the story that was in a sense my own.

For her it was the end, but for me, something had begun.

### *There is this light that falls*

A few days after her death, I went to empty what remained in her apartment. A charitable organization had already come to collect the furniture; I had to sort through objects and boxes full of papers. I needed to hurry because the owner of the residence threatened to charge me rent for the following month if I did not vacate it within a week!

In the middle of the three rooms, I felt as if I were surrounded by the remainders of Simone's life, but also by the ruins of my childhood, this landscape that suddenly escaped me.

I began with a box containing ten or so elephants with trunks raised that Simone liked to collect. I would sometimes bring them back for her from my journeys; they were in a box together with some nautical instruments, including an old compass and a nautical chart of the St. Lawrence from the 1950s that I decided to keep, just for their beauty. I did not know she liked navigational objects; I had always thought she hated anything to do with boats.

Then I opened a box filled with all kinds of papers; I sat on the floor in the middle of the living room and picked up a large pile of sheets and postcards, a few envelopes that were addressed to her and several notebooks.

Simone had kept each of the cards I had sent her on my journeys. What a strange sensation to hold them now in my hands and to read what I wrote to her from Spain, Finland, Argentina or Sweden, brief news of my stays, a few words about the weather, and each time the same question — how are you? — to which no one ever replies.

Photos slipped out of the pile. In one of them, I am in Simone's arms. My father must have taken it; I am maybe two or three years old; there is a cottage behind us and a lake as well. She is smiling; but something in

her gaze appears far away, even a little sad. This is the gaze I have never been able to explain to myself.

In another photo, she is in a man's arms and must be about twenty. He looks to be much older, perhaps forty, and they appear close to one another: a kind of intimacy that you can sense in the way they are standing; his hand rests on Simone's shoulder, her head is slightly tilted, as if they were touching each other inwardly more than what is outwardly shown in the photo. The man is not her brother, or my father; perhaps he is an uncle I did not know, or one of her cousins. It must have been a family celebration and Simone was meeting up with a relative she had not seen in a long time.

Behind the pile of photos sits one of my childhood notebooks, four-coloured with lined or squared pages, and in which all students take their notes in class. I imagine it must be one of those she decided to keep as a souvenir, she who didn't like to hold on to the past.

Opening it, I recognized Simone's handwriting.

Quebec City, 1947

*She had loved him intensely*

The first time she sees him, she feels an irresistible force seize hold of her. He is laughing with his group of friends; they are in the harbour. Simone is strolling with her friend Charlotte; she notices a man taller than the others, more handsome as well, and clearly older. The masts are swaying behind him, looking like a forest rustling. He looks at her as well, while continuing to laugh with his friends. Simone and Charlotte advance toward the quays; the man does not take his eyes off her, and when the two young women pass in front of the group, he approaches.

Simone doesn't know how to answer when he speaks to her, asking if she sails. She has never boarded a sailboat, has only watched them, fascinated by the grace of the high-masted boats that unfurl their sails to carry them out to the open waters. She often goes to the harbour to stroll along the quays, enjoys seeing the sailors slowly rigging their sailboats, departing the dock and leaving the city's beauty behind them to reach that of the water. She imagines the view of Cap Diamant from the River; today she asked Charlotte to come strolling with her. *No, I'm not in school*, Simone replied; *I work as a secretary for an insurance company, but excuse me, we have to go now . . .*

She loved him. Intensely.

That irresistible force had entered her. They saw each other again a few days later. Then another time, and yet another. He showed her the light that chisels the water's surface and let her hear the silence of the stars. With him, she knew the power of desire and sensual pleasure, slow hours of loving one another, from one tide to the next, their naked bodies lying on the deck, hands intertwined like their entire lives, a strong and complete love unthreatened by anything.

From the moment Antoine embraced her and gently led her to the bed at the back of the cabin of his sailboat, from the moment they joined each other naked and looked each other straight in the eye, whisked away by the current, becoming together four arms and four legs intertwined, as soon as their faces approached one another and their mouths met in a kiss that erased time, Simone knew she would never stop loving him and would never leave him. From the moment their bodies ignited she knew that from then on that her greatest sorrow would be to live without him.

When they left Antoine's sailboat, it was as if their bodies were still reeling beneath the strength of their love. Bound together by a slight dizziness, they swayed to and fro as they walked, their embrace prolonged on the never solid ground that could not interrupt them.

In the street, people looked at them. They were both handsome and very much in love, but as he could have been her father, if they noticed their intimacy, people on the lookout for scandal would turn around, muttering, or look at them disapprovingly. It did not bother them. Simone did not have any doubts; she knew Antoine was the love she had sometimes imagined could exist, a love to which she would give everything. And from that love, she would receive everything.

She knew that together they would navigate many rivers, go through the worst storms and the slowest deserts, and that the winds, when they came, would end up subsiding.

“[Hélène Dorion] uses external texts to rhythm her own prose: a casualties list, newspaper clippings of fluvial tragedies on the Saint-Laurent River, and notebooks, poems, postcards, and pictures left by Hanna’s mother, Simone. In this polysemic message, Dorion and Hanna compete for the narrative voice as Hanna speaks sometimes in the first person and sometimes in the third person, in a subtly unsettling shift between autobiography and fiction.

[...] As Hanna travels to Simone’s hometown after her mother’s death, a four-hour riverbank drive from Montréal to Kamouraska, both the river and the family story widen. Little by little, Hanna connects her memories of Eva and Simone to “The Majestic,” as the Saint-Laurent is called. Eva and Simone lost their fiancés, their first loves, to the river. [...] Dorion’s description of love’s phantom pains buried in deep silence is masterful.

– Alice-Catherine Carls, *World Literature Today*, USA

“This magnificently written novel powerfully and subtly reminds us that people’s memories are long, that they run through generations and centuries, revealing, many years after they rise to the surface, repercussions of life’s dramas, large and small. This novel changes people for the better. Navigating it will involve undercurrents of emotion.”

– Claudia Larochelle, *Elle Québec*

“A gentle tribute to the power of art, and a call to life.”

– Samuel Larochelle, *La Presse*

“It deals with shipwrecks that people do not survive without grief, catastrophes that haunt our loved ones, *Pas même le bruit d’un fleuve* also celebrates the beauty of what has remained mysterious in others, and is revealed one day, as a result of time and chance.”

– Dominic Tardif, *Le Devoir*

“A short novel of great beauty by the recipient of the prix Athanase-David 2019, the highest distinction awarded in Québec for literature.”

– Éric Moreault, *Le Soleil*

“Following her mother’s death, Hanna discovers documents that lead her to try to discover what was concealed beneath her mother’s silence. The story takes her back to the sinking of the Empress of Ireland in Pointe-au-Père, near Rimouski, in 1914.”

– Esther Laforce and Chantal Valade, librarians, *BAnQ chez moi* (National Library and Archives of Quebec)

“All these women’s voices eloquently show that writing – and in a wider sense, art – manages to break with the tradition of destinies stifled by male hegemony that has always pervaded history [...] the reflections that emerge from this novel reveal truths going far beyond the controversial boundary separating the real from fiction.”

– Michaël Blais, magazine *Spirale*

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Book suggested by Karine Vanasse (Radio-Canada, *Bonsoir bonsoir*) – Richard Séguin (*La Tribune*) – Simon Boulerice (Télé-Québec, *Cette année-là*) – Claudia Larochelle (*Elle Québec*, 15 Summer Reads) – Laurie Dupont (*Magazine Véro*, Top 10 Québécois Books to Read) – Coup de coeur (favourite): Renaud-Bray – Les Libraires (booksellers) recommend: selected in August 2020 – *La Métropole.com*, *The Top 13 books of the year* – Selected as one of the Canadian books of the year 2020 ICI – ARTV – Selected as one of the 25 favourite books of 2020 of the Libraires indépendants du Québec – Selected as one of “Our best books of 2020” of the *Le Soleil* newspaper – 12th in the 50 bestsellers of 2020 of the Independent bookstores.