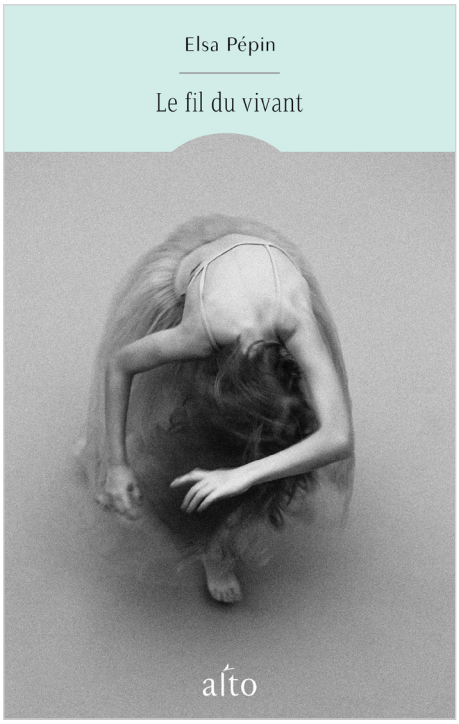

Le fil du vivant

Elsa Pépin

Excerpt translated by
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« *Le fil du vivant* is both an apocalyptic tale,
and a tribute to the women who lose themselves
in ensuring the survival of the human species.»
Les libraires

ELSA PÉPIN

Elsa Pépin was born in Montreal in 1978. A journalist and editor, she's been writing books for the past decade that focus on the body, parent-child relationships, and our connection to the world around us. Published in 2014, her story collection *Quand j'étais l'Amérique* (Éditions XYZ, Quai no 5) won the Prix littéraire des enseignants AQPF-ANEL and was shortlisted for the Prix France-Québec. In 2016, she put out her first novel, *Les sanguines* (Alto). She's also edited two anthologies : *Amour & libertinage par les trentenaires d'aujourd'hui* (Les 400 coups) in 2011 and *Dans le ventre, histoires d'accouchement* (Éditions XYZ, Quai no 5) in 2019. *Le fil du vivant* is her second novel.

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Synopsis

As torrential rains lash Quebec, Iona, a harried mother of two, is torn between her deep maternal instincts and the need to find herself again. To escape the perfectly ordered but exhausting life imposed on her by her husband, Nils, she reminisces about her youth, her experiences with drugs, and her mad love for a boy who'd do anything to test her limits.

When floodwaters threaten Montreal, Iona is jolted out of her reverie. Nils drives his wife and children up north to take shelter at a luxurious estate belonging to his family. They hole up with friends and relatives far from civilization in a waterlogged forest that's full of surprises. As the food supply dwindles and mayhem breaks out across the province, tensions mount in the opulent old mansion between those who'll fight fiercely to protect their resources and those, like Iona, who put faith in solidarity and embrace the forces of chaos.

In this lush, lyrical novel, Elsa Pépin conjures up a disaster but laces her story with love and hope. She reveals the extremes governing our lives and shows how startlingly porous the borders are between the self and the world, water and earth, and life and death.

The baby's cry tears me from my sleep, unless it's an echo, a hallucination. At night, his cries come so close together they compress time, twist it, form a single loose, hazy fabric, a circle whose center I lose myself in, dissolve into. Each cry repeated again and again demands its sound box: my body.

I'm a taut bow, an arrow ready to fly to my baby at the slightest sound. I'm also an eye drawn by the glow behind the opaque curtain of the bedroom. I dream of escaping through the window.

Nils sleeps peacefully, not bothered at all by the baby, doesn't even hear him. Only my ultrasensitive mother's ear picks up our child's whimpers. A paradoxical advantage that binds me to the baby by an invisible, inextricable thread, a lifeline cutting me off from my dreams. I'm held hostage by this tiny creature who needs me close at all times. A passage has opened toward him and will never close again.

I drag myself out of bed, shiver as I shuffle across the icy floor. I'm chilled to the bone. I seek a source of heat to recover the restful sleep that's been denied to me for months. Only the baby's body can rouse me from my torpor and soothe me as he nurses. My mouth is dry, my joints are stiff, my head is heavier than before bed. Continually disrupted, my sleep tires me out rather than revives me. I'm a zombie, constantly queasy, barely human as the hours tick by without proper rest.

But when the baby's cries enter my head, chest, heart, and belly, they release my hormones, turn my erogenous zones into pieces of meat. A few drops of milk leak from my big, hard breasts, heavy as melons swollen with sugar. Drunk on prolactin, I have a deep yearning for this mouth, this body-to-body contact. I could take down an army to nurse my baby. I'm invincible, engorged with this matter that I produce and offer up bountifully. An alchemist, I turn fluid into food, just as microorganisms have converted matter into light energy through photosynthesis for 3.7 billion years. I want to run to my child, but I'm weary, as crumbly as wet sand, trapped despite myself in a loop that consumes me, deprives me, drains me of all substance, blurs my features till I'm a rough draft of myself. Only the baby knows me by my smell, the mammalian secret buried within me. The smell of his larder. Even before he takes my breast, the baby metabolizes me, guided to me like a wild animal stalking a willing, generous, and devoted prey.

Arthur grabs hold of my breast without looking at me. His eyes close, the valves open, yield to his powerful sucking. Only then, erased from my life, do I find some tepid comfort in this selflessness.

For five months now, my body has been ruled by my offspring's hunger. I nursed his sister not so long ago and haven't forgotten the limbo she trapped me in. But this grip on me is still surprising. Maybe the same thing awaits with a third, fourth, fifth child? Each time I'll be sucked into a vortex where day and night are reversed, where the hours flow by, merge like rivers of magma. Each time I'll be overwhelmed by a life disrupted, derailed, thrown into chaos. A slave to a sweet but vicious cycle of love, a child's plaything, endlessly emptied and refilled. Despite the insomnia, the aching muscles, the loss of memory, the feeling of renting myself out for cheap, I relish this grip. Who doesn't dream of melting into someone else?

(p. 11-13)

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He takes my hand. His is clammy and cold. Feeling him touch me reassures me for a thousandth of a second. Something in me stays alive in the midst of the maelstrom. I manage to crack open my eyes to see his rolling back in his head. I notice purplish splotches on his face. The cap of a poisonous mushroom. He frightens me. Lying beside me, he's talking to me, but I hear nothing. I'm deaf, disabled, soon to be devoured by the overdose. The poison continues its slow spread. A viper is sucking my blood. A tongue slinks into my stomach, strips it, licks it clean, hollows it out, ripping from it all that belongs to me. I'm going to throw up. Collapse, bow before the beast about to swallow me.

I go into a honeycomb. The buzzing of the bees penetrates my ear and seeps into my head. I'm devoured by a multitude of mouths siphoning me off entirely, pulverizing me into a thousand parts. I'm eaten fruit. The bees have sucked me up. They'll make honey out of me.

Billions of stingers sink into my skin, make holes in me.

Excerpt

Distant voices reach me in flickers. Hands paw at me, palpate me, try to resuscitate me. Alone, unreachable, I try to go to the place where nothing more is born.

Arms carry me. They try to retrieve me, but I can't bring my mind back to be among theirs. Curiosity combined with terror drags me to the ground and below. I have an irreversible headache.

Blackout.

The bees set me free, abandon me. A white sky opens up with long gray streaks, a coulis of viscous matter, trails of my evisceration. I like these traces that expand me.

I open my eyes. He's here, stroking my hair with his big, clammy hand. He smiles. "There you are, Iona. Beautiful as ever."

No, he's the one who's beautiful. His orchestral voice brings me back to life. I'm a receptacle of love. He looks at me with his pupils like oceans, and I'm the backwash of his movements. I take liquid form.

The buzzing of the bees is still here, in my eyes, in my lungs, in my guts. I let myself be multiplied, carried outside myself by a colony. I domesticate my dissipation, even the idea of my near death, as an expansion, a greater grip on what surrounds me. I draw toward me everything I need; I subject the world to my desire. I don't know the way back. All that counts is the rapture of this moment, this flying on-the-spot without beginning or end, like a wheel going nowhere in the ease of its movement. Absence is at my core, an expanse as big as an unspoiled forest, never cleared.

At first almost immobile, I let the wave wash over my eyes. The world is transparent to me. I inhabit the faces I see. The pores in my body open, windows soaking up the sound and the light, my arms outstretched, great helicopter wings, sensors of life.

How could I think I was alive without feeling the infinite joy of belonging only to sensation? I flow into all living species and into the inanimate others, cold stone, black waters, impure sands. The particles enter through my skin. Foraged and foraging, fragmented and fused, I redraw my contours.

(p. 62-64)

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The sun still hasn't come out. Little by little, our sprouts wither, shrivel, die. The garden looks like a graveyard. The heavy rains drowned the seedlings we pinned our last hopes on. Still, Nils keeps turning the soil over in search of dry patches.

He thought of everything: supplies, seeds, compass, generator, water disinfectant. But he didn't anticipate the sun vanishing and curses himself for that. "Artificial lighting would have saved us," he says over and over. If only we had halogen lamps or some source of heat and light. Helpless, we watch the garden die in the shadow of a missing sun.

Growing everywhere are unfamiliar, mutant plants that thrive on an abundance of water and lack of light. A viscous, porous flora gorged with liquid. These bastard plants are more ash-gray than green or white, the absence of color a sign of their worthlessness, their lack of chlorophyll and nutrients. But these mutants must be here for a reason. Their unusual growth surely has something to teach us.

The trees from before the flood are dying out. Red and silver maple, yellow birch, pine, black spruce, fir, larch. Apple trees, raspberry and elderberry bushes. Only tree species that like heavy rainfall can survive. Willow, poplar, cypress, water oak. How can we go from the northern landscape we knew and loved to this? Nils hates walking in our transformed forest. He mourns each lost tree. As for me, I learn to adapt to the new landscape one plant at a time.

Joséphine turns this forest of sickly vegetation into a maze, wearing stems of giant kelp as a crown. Arthur, sitting beside her, tries to grasp twigs with his clumsy little hands and stick them in his mouth.

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