

Monique S. Simón



Raven in my Arms

I LOVE MY BODY.

It contains for me not just the pleasures in life, but the intensity of life, and for reasons unknown to me, life's intensity is what makes it true for me.

I feel like a stinking cheat sometimes, like I stole my life away from it's ethereal place and hid it deep down in a woman's womb.

Waiting for a moment to get out and wrap the thing up in rhythm, stick it up some winking God's face and tell him, I got something he's never seen, didn't quite imagine.

"Monique. . . , baby, I let you just rip it, 'cause I knew all the time you had it."

"Like a Raven, right, perched, waiting. . . ?"

"You're gonna seize it?"

Even if it's in an island woman on an island not her own, a life less—?"

"You said life, right?"

Still, the whole act of ripping off some of life for the sake of being in a body, living in the intensity of human condition, comes with its rough edges.

MY FIRST TASTE OF THIS COVERT ACT OF GRABBING HOLD OF THAT SWEET intensity of life came when I was 3. My family lived in French Town, St. Thomas in one of those homes perched atop what must have been a naturally hilly area. At least that was the only reasonable explanation for why island construction philosophy had dictated building homes, recessed by straggling, graduating concrete steps that lead precariously to concrete-paved, elevated yards. My two brothers, 2 and 3 years older than I, but existing as one entity in my dreamy memory, had been running races against me within the vast parameters of "from 'de top of 'de concrete step to over there by 'de wall." And though I did not understand it as winning, I knew that there was something precious that could come at the end of these races that could only be defined by having it. Then one day, just after being 3 and knowing that 3 was something only for me, I remember my legs

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breaking free. They carried me at a thunderous pace past Mr. 5 and his brother “6 and change.” And I was so close to touching the wall and I was so afraid to look back and I could hear them calling to me from far, far behind and I heard the “Mon—eeque, you winning!” and I was too “winning” that long, rough race I was running since 2. And I was screaming because I was doing that thing that I knew was the thing they were doing all the time when I was 2 and I couldn’t run so fast. And I was so “free,” even though that’s not what I called it because I didn’t have words like that. And I was feeling so alive, even though I didn’t know what that was. And I was maybe 20 when I realized that somebody, probably Mr. 5 and his brother, let me have that thing I was feeling and couldn’t say. And I still am ready to cry now when my body remembers that feeling, that thing about being 3, that Mr. 5 and his brother claim they can’t remember with their “Yeah, we used to run a lotta race and t’ing back then.” All I know is I got my hands on a piece of that life thing; wrapped my arms around that wildly hungry Raven; felt it so that my being in my body thing was something I was loving. Especially since one day, sometime after being four, I realized that we —3, 5 and 6, could have fallen over backwards and “damn near kill all you selves” if we’d made one misstep at the starting line.

AND THEN I WAS 8, AND HE WAS RAPING ME, SODOMIZING ME, “BY ’DE WATER pipe near ’de USO” and “I’ll kill you if you make any noise, if you tell anybody.” And I knew that I couldn’t hold my life in my body just them. I knew I should let the Raven fly, that it’s voracious appetite was too intense for my little body in ’de orange dress with white polka dots that Mommy make on her own sewing machine. And I was there underneath him but I wasn’t, you know... And when he turned me over to face him, I knew I had to come back, you know..., back, back to my body, my little body with ’de too big pink panties that Mommy got from ’de Salvation Army. I didn’t want to come back, you know..., but the Raven’s aim was straight, the beak sharp. And I wasn’t 8 again, I was the oldest woman in the oldest body, with the oldest story about being dirty and useless and less and used because a man put his thing in..., “no not there,” I had to come back. Because he didn’t have a right to make me so bad because I was good, and life in my body was good. And I begged him, “please, ... don’t, my father will give you anything. Don’t do it there...; and I looked at him in his eyes, with the eyes from “Mon-eeque, you winning!”... and he couldn’t put it there and I think he made me a promise..., but I don’t know if it was good or bad, because I wasn’t in my head, you know..., I was just in my body. And I was “whole” still, even if I wasn’t. Because I could lie and say “a man, a man try to rape me in my bum.” And the hospital people could check me and prove it, and when they ask me about the cut, I could tell them it was ’de gravel, you know... And, Mommy could breathe out and ’de hospital lady in ’de white coat could look me in ’de eye and she could see my eye begging her and she could ask Mommy to leave the room and handle ’de

paperwork, so *she* could hold me, and hold me, and *she* could keep my secret 'cause she see how Mommy aint have any money, and Mommy come from some foreign island and 'de hospital lady feel to my little body like she know what it's like to be the oldest woman in the oldest body and to want to be 8 again.

AND THEN I WAS 11, GOING ON 12.

But I was living inside every woman's age, because I was wearing a yellow panty and spotting red blood. But I'd read a booklet, "brought to you by Kotex" that told me becoming a woman was beautiful and natural. That I could still ride a bike, even swim while having my menstrual flow. Which was funny because I didn't know how to do either, even though I lived on an island with a long stretch of waterfront and at least a dozen beaches. It was so nice to have somewhere that my brothers who could bike, swim, and climb trees couldn't have if they tried. I was in this woman dream, tossing my five or six braids around, seeing myself in a pale green skirt set, biking my sexy, woman self in my breezy silk skirt and matching tee.

So by 'de time Mommy brought home some olivey green pieces from the Salvation Army and I'd worn the things into submission, it was a genuine shock to my woman dream the day my mother spotted some menstrual blood that seeped its secret onto my faded, green courdroy skirt and jarred me into some other kind of woman body. The one where my mother sat me down, chided me for becoming a "young lady" without letting her know that I was now a potential threat to the family's stability and good name. That anybody who could keep that kind of secret could not be trusted.

And I could feel 'de hospital lady in 'de white coat holding me, and I could feel the tampon that was half in, half out, I was so tight, and I could feel my brothers laughing at me. And I left my head so I didn't have to hear my mother, until I listened again and heard she was making me quit my job as Shampoo Girl at the beauty salon because "you t'ink you is a woman." But that's what I wanted: to be a woman in green who read too many books and knew how to masturbate and give herself an orgasm at 12. But I also wanted to keep my job. Even if it was mostly really sweeping up, buying the pizza, and only half-reading magazines while the women talked. So, I pretended to be sorry. And I was because I didn't honestly want to hurt my mother. And it was a rough, edgy life in this body kinda thing; me, pretending it was my first menstrual cycle, that I needed to be taught how to use pads, and that "no make no man touch you" was sound sexual advice for a sodomized, orgasmic pre-teen.

AND NOW, THEN, ALWAYS I AM NOT CONTAINABLE AS A SPECIFIC AGE, A CERTAIN woman, when I'm dancing. I don't know when I found it, but Mommy says I was wiggling when I

was born and Daddy used to dance with me for tourists at hotels, and they called me “Wire Waist” at weddings and parties back home in Antigua. But the whole dance thing doesn’t need a beginning. It’s like a chronic attack of that intense ass living thing in this changeable coffer of a body thing that’s always had me. I love to move this body, feel it hitting the ground, shake the wind around any space I’m in. And those wicked song writers who wrap me up in lyrics and sounds, Joan, Bob, John, Macy, Peter, Tina, Nelson, Johnny, Paul, Natalie, . . . ; I could fill pages with the stuff they do to me, how Grace and Martin come and find me in my sane, quiet spaces and make me late for work, working my body inside of, around, underneath, and above some tune they wrote just ‘cause I happened to be feeling just that thing this morning. Don’t get me started with Juan Luis and Gloria finding me at some club where I only came to celebrate Gina’s going away party, to have a glass of Cranberry juice and leave ‘cause I’m so tired, but wind up staying, forcing half the party off the dance floor and looking down at some guy on his knees still trying to wiggle to keep up with me. Wearing out suitors and rousing husbands and otherwise committed lovers for “just one dance, Monique,” unwilling to think about their women sitting and sipping envy.

Then comes the late night, solitaire dances — doused in lonely, stomping out rage and fright, snapping away tomorrow, clapping up hope. Quieting to slow, lyrical melodies as Andreas and candles register a Raven’s cries, swooning and circling till they find some way to gorge on delight. And the sweet, womanly sweat that signals complete exhaustion conjures “that chill, you see she wiggling since she born.” And I’m winning when I dance; I’m getting away with that rip off of a very particular piece of heaven, ‘cause my body dancing shows off all of life. And God is happy.

AND, I’M IN MY BED, AND I’M REMEMBERING THAT I’M 11 AGAIN, THAT I WANT to forget that I was that age and that sick with a thyroid condition, wanting to give back the life I grabbed for a little spell. I feel my body, aching in places inside that I didn’t really know a body had. The joints, the bones, my head, my hair falling out, my neck stuck to one side, the left, a sore oozing from where Mommy tried to medicate what she thought was the mumps by tying hot, sweet potatoes about my neck, near my thyroid glands. The heat, the island heat I could never tolerate, feeling hotter, and fiercer. My thoughts, a haze. I hear talk I’m not supposed to hear about death and “nastiness” causing my illness. Quarrels about cleanliness. And I want to die because I’m so tired of being poor and foreign and unclean and a problem. I ask somebody (not God, because he wouldn’t like it) to let me die. And I heard some people laughing, and a radio playing the latest calypso song, and Mommy was eating sweet pastry like she was never going to have another sweet thing in her life. And my brothers were trading science facts, and my little sister was fat and smiling. And I asked God to let me live. Because if he’d just do that for me, I’d dedicate my life to poor children who didn’t have money for the doctor or sweet pastries or the latest set of encyclopedias. But mostly those

who were foreign and unclean and sick like me, because I knew how life in a body like that felt. And I knew that children like that laughed and danced and kept secrets.

AND I WAS 19. A FEW MONTHS SHY OF EARNING MY B. A. IN HUMANITIES. I WAS keeping a secret, from the man I would soon marry. It was December 15th and I was going to let him make love to me, finally. I met him at his place in New York City's West Village. We shared shrimp fried rice from Suzie's. He tasted me in between bites; I enjoyed my secret. I watched his sexy ankles as he climbed the stairs to his loft bed. He looked back at me, trailing unusually slowly. I smiled up at him. He reached for my hand and I had the most unusual thought: "I really like Suzie's shrimp."

We had the usual sexual play. I told myself school was almost finished. I was a good girl and I'd kept both myself and Rudzani sexually satisfied until I was ready for the real thing.

Then he found out my secret.

He was inside me and I was feeling my body in places I knew I'd only know until I traded this secret for another one. And I was at the edge of something that was like being 3 and "Mon-eeque, you winning!" and I'd barely touched my fingers to the wall, the cement wall in the yard in French Town, the white-washed, brick wall next to Ru's bed. And I was feeling my body dancing with a different kind of living and a subtle kind of pain, and it was over too fast, and I gave him baby punches because he was getting sleepy and I wasn't sure I could keep this new secret by myself.

And he said, "but, Monique, Mona, hon, I didn't know." And when he called me, Mona, for Mona Lisa, I let him sleep because he was my artist boyfriend, and he waited almost two years to find out my December 15th secret, and be sleepy after the real thing. And there was left over Suzie's shrimp and fried rice for later.

AND I WAS 20, WITH A "BOUGHT FROM A STREET VENDOR" GREEN AND OPAL RING on my finger, and engaged to a guy who proposed by tackling me on his new bed (one of Diana's old ones) in one of the real bedrooms at Diana's West Village loft, with Diana's doves cooing, and I'm sure without Diana's white, South African, mother's maven blessings. And I felt his energy and desire in a way that a girl is supposed to feel when she's about to be one of four women joining a new grad school program in Communications at Hunter College in New York City, with a black South African artist boyfriend who came to the City on BFA scholarship. I felt his body tackling my body, his life taking over mine with his sex and his dreams and his subtle abuses. But he brought me the freshest Zito's bread on Sunday mornings, and introduced me to the sting of Wasabi on sushi/sashimi combination. And he called me Mona, for Mona Lisa. And helped me to smell the salt

of the City with his sophisticated Soweto, Johannesburg self. And I felt my body awake with anger at his offenses, my heart consumed by the want for his love, my infamous courage flayed by his persistent controls. But being a woman, underneath him, beside him, on top of him... Having my childhood sodomy cleansed, my menstrual cycle welcomed, my orgasms justified, my "you t'ink you is a woman" validated by the scepter of marriage was what I needed to feel okay at 21 with grabbing the exploits of life and riveting their rhythms into my body.

AND THEN I WAS 22, TURNING 23 WHEN THE OTHER ILLNESS SET IN. IT HAD NO name for over 6 months. A black woman who was not rich did not fit the profile for Epstein Barr. It was a yuppie disease. And whatever my muscle aches, flu-like symptoms, extreme exhaustion was about, it was certainly not caused by the disease of the privileged. And it was my own damned fault for thinking that foreign, poor, unclean women who slept with foreign, poor, teargassed-spotted men had some kind of claim to that "always-on-the-go life." I should be teaching at an inner-city high school, not trying to hold significant administrative positions in education and write cutting-edge historical media thesis for Masters in Communications programs. I should keep my orgasms in check, leave art openings to Madison Avenue socialites, and get used to being a tired, black woman. And sometimes I did. Then for the first time, I started having gratitude for my illness because without the amazing energy it took to be me outside and deal with Rudzani's controls inside, I got a raven-eyed view of how I'd been living. Of how my active, capable body was caging my life. I found myself, sitting at the side of my tub, clutching at my stomach, pounding softly there, sounding the words until the volume was finally audible to me, saying "I have a right to exist, I have a right to exist, I have..., exist..., a right..."

I found the right doctor, Dr. Granderson, an island man who didn't balk at my island remedies for general nourishment and stamina. I researched health. I dismissed the New Age when it dipped too far into my purse and insulted my everyday need to be on this flawed planet. I looked at my dreadlocked, sophisticated, talented, sexy husband and still saw his abuse for what it was. I wasn't willing to give him my energy yet. I was waiting, like the Raven, for a time when I could cry out somewhere other than in the silence of my bathroom at the edge of the tub. Someplace, sometime when I didn't care that our friends thought my Rudzani was a talented, dedicated, pacific guy who I was lucky to have. When I could be the woman I was, without needing him to justify my pleasures or rationalize my pain. I was precariously perched at the top of the cement steps, focussed on keeping myself steady, listening for the "on your mark, get set, GO!" that would allow me to run towards the break free of "Mon-eque, you winning!"

AND WHILE I WAS BECOMING, IN MY 20'S, MARRIED AND WAITING, I MET A woman who became my friend after she and her husband (two ordinary island people) had moved into my building in Brooklyn. A year later, they'd had a child and named her Raven. And Raven in my arms with her parents loving and sharing her, cloaking her in filial love, fashioning both their magic and their mistakes out of that love, came to have a profound effect on my becoming.... They're preparation for this child, their commitment to her safe becoming brought back the steady arm of an older brother, preventing me from falling backwards while perched on the top cement step, about to take off in the latest race. Something about Raven's parents standing by in close guard, cheering as Raven half-walked, half toddled past the sofa's edge, reaching to touch the wall in front of her, reminded me of the lack of sound I'd heard when my brothers had stopped running so I could break free and forge ahead. I remember, hearing the words as if they'd filled in my memories for the first time." On your mark..." I knew what I wanted..., "Get set..." I arranged my career, capitalized on my Master's thesis, accepted that my family history wasn't my family future. "GO!"

AND I WAS 27 AND MOANING AND CRYING AND IN SUCH AN UNUSUAL SEXUAL position, I kissed the inside of my own knee because something had to be kissed. The feeling of my eighth orgasm in one night could no longer be described as a feeling: it was a different kind of existence. I was never more simultaneously awake and yet in deepest dream as I was that late Spring night. When Rudzani was finished with me, or me with him, he held me on our bed, my back facing his. I curled my fingers in his, squeezed them, pulled his big hands tighter around my little waistline he loved to marvel at. He made a sound that was clearly his, not the man I'd had to imagine I was with in order to have this night. I kept my gaze on the wall next to our bed a little longer, touched the smoothed roughness of the sheet-rocked wall with the tips of my fingers. I was going to do it. I was going to turn around and face him. I would know my secret if I did, but I was long tired of the secrets my body held in order to hold on to the life I'd seized. I turned swiftly, before I could stop myself; I looked at his face and let myself in on my own humiliating secret. I did not love him. I'd only needed him to justify me as a sexual woman, to give me a wall to touch when I was tired of all the running it took to stay in a life that was filled with secret horrors that sometimes crippled me. I hadn't expected he would become one of them. I immediately got out of bed and went to the living room. I'm not sure when I started crying, but I knew that when I did, I was finally free of him and all the reasons I needed him. My body was 3 again and I was running and I was "Mon-eeque, you winning!" This time, being 3 was different from the first time; this time, I wasn't afraid to look back, I just couldn't.

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AND I WAS 27 GOING ON 28 AND THERE WAS RAVEN. NOT QUITE A YEAR OLD, but safely past that awkward stage when holding her was like holding Tiffany china in wet fingers. Now, she was a robust little thing who said “Ba”, that Haitian word for kiss and pursed her lips to give me one. And Raven in my arms made me wonder how I could be beaten so severely as a child that red welts decorated my skin—trapped blood, like the trappings of a loving child in a hateful environment. And Raven made me wonder how my own mother could call me a “worthless little whore” when I was barely 8 and could continue to call me that until somewhere around 12 when it wasn’t she who’d stopped but me who didn’t hear it any more. And Raven in my arms was so soft. I wanted to caress her skin, save her smell, give her “ba” all the time everywhere. And Raven in my arms made me wonder why Uncle John couldn’t just love me for being a special girl, why he had to touch me in a way that made me believe that not even my body could be my own special place. And Raven in my arms challenged my marriage. I didn’t want a Raven with a man who I couldn’t talk to about all the things that Raven made me think about. And Raven in my arms made me want, for certain now, a Raven in my arms. But not with him, and not without the intense life of love between lovers, who turn to face each other and yes, maybe cried or maybe couldn’t speak because the other’s existence at that moment for you and only you makes you want all of life.

