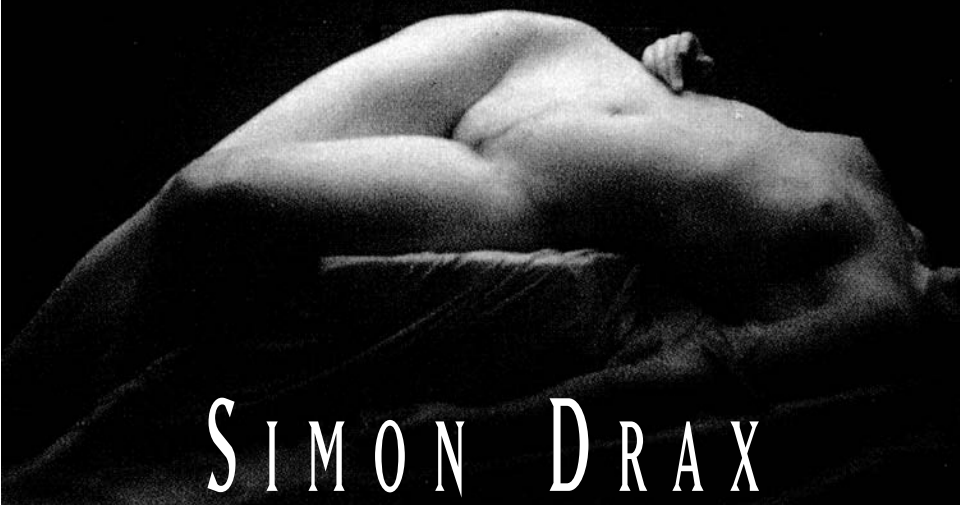


NUMINA

THREE VARIANTS OF SORROW



SIMON DRAX

To the Silence...

SIMON DRAX
NUMINA



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I
HAUNTED

II
THE STORM

III
FADE



I: HAUNTED



MAXIE SENT US A POSTCARD, a very nice do-it-yourself-for-ten-dollars-postcard printed on very nice paper, a black and white photo of her and her friends in Heaven. They're all wearing sunglasses and drinking pepsi and everybody's smiling. Oh, I said, it's nice that she still thinks of us, and the postcard smoldered and crinkled and turned to ash in my hands. After a second I brushed the ashes away, swept them up with the dust broom. I wondered if I should throw them away like common scraps— maybe use them in the garden, maybe give them to Father James on Sunday. Then from the living room Bill yelled, Is there any mail? I yelled back, A card from Maxie! Bill said, Oh, that's nice, can I see it? I opened the refrigerator and sang, How about another beer, sweetie?

Maxie called the next day, I knew it was Maxie even before I

picked up the phone, because every bird on the wire outside was electrocuted. She said, Hi, it's me! Did you get the postcard? Pretty neat, wasn't it, I thought you'd like it, oh, hey, Ma? Can I borrow some money? It's really really really important, would you, Ma, please? I told her Yes and squinted out the window at the dead birds on the sidewalk. Thanks Ma, Maxie was saying, thank you thank you thank you... and her voice was like water, rushing somewhere far away, maybe to the ocean, maybe further. When she was little she loved the beach; she was so adorable in her bonnet and swimsuit. And I realized the line was dead. I hung up the phone and went into the living room where Bill sat sunk in his chair, muttering to the television.

Maxie's coming by, I told him.

Oh, swell, Bill said. What's for dinner?

Pigeon pie, I said.

Oh swell, Bill said, and he slurped his beer, made a face and cried, That damn stupid ump doesn't know shit, Wilson was safe!

I sat with him a while, watching, thinking, wiping my hands on my apron. I made the pie. The sun went down. Bill fell asleep. The Red Sox lost. Outside, the wind moved through the

trees, and our street was quiet. I couldn't sleep. So I looked at photographs.

The next day there was a hard fast knock-knock-knock! on the door and Maxie marched in, a breeze sharp as January coming with her as she cried, Hi, it's me, can't stay, busy busy! Is there anything to eat? She left smoking footprints as she went to the refrigerator, she said, Ah! and took out my fresh head of lettuce and sat down at the table. The radio started to whine like a cat. The television flickered and rolled like the ocean. And Bill wandered in, up from his nap.

Well, hey! Who's this? Bill said.

He bent close and kissed her cheek, his spit sizzling on her skin.

Hi, Daddy, Maxie said, her mouth full of lettuce.

I stood in the corner of the kitchen, my hands turning, pulling, rubbing against my apron.

You look thin, I told her.

Maxie took the lettuce with both hands and took a big bite. Well, there's like lots to do, she said, snapping and crunching. We have to, like, polish the stars every morning, and uh, figure out which way the wind's going to blow, stuff like that. It's

okay. Sometimes it's fun. I like haunting the best. Makes me feel normal, she said, and looked at me, her eyes flat and cold as two stones at the bottom of a pond. I shuddered. Couldn't help it. Maxie shrugged and took another bite.

Bill smiled and nodded, still half-asleep. Then he said, Any nice young guys up there?

Maxie rolled her eyes and said, Da-deee! with her mouth full and Bill laughed and I tried to laugh too but I couldn't, my heart was squeezing my chest breathless the way it always does when she comes, my eyes only for her, filled with her, stocking up on every inch of her till the next time. Then I wondered why. She never changes. She was the same as the pictures I had stared at last night, photos twenty years yellow with age—she was the same as the day she'd left.

Some parents have long distance phone calls at Christmas, and copies of grandchildren's report cards; other parents stop buying new calendars and settle for what they can.

Maxie had asked for money, that day. It had been so important. The biggest thing in the world.

So I stood in the corner of the kitchen, two fives and a ten curled tight in my hand. Bill hadn't seen it yet and I was hoping

he wouldn't; he loves to see his little girl but he goes crazy when she comes around for money. I just hoped she could take the cash without making a scene. And go.



II: THE STORM

DESPITE THE REASSURANCES of my strange and unexpected guest, I feel something bad, something very, very bad, must be happening.

“Is it war?” I ask.

She shakes her head. *It's nothing*, she says, the words like sunlight on my old, mottled skin. *It will be over by morning, and I'll disappear with the dawn. May I have another cigarette?*

But I'm an old man, so I worry. I've had a lifetime to worry, spent decades worrying about everything from taxes to my teeth to my children, only to watch the taxes get higher and my teeth go rotten and fall bloody from my mouth; only to watch my oldest boy grow up and move away, only to watch my youngest turn sour, turn mean, till that day in eighty-five he picked the wrong liquor store to rob, a liquor store whose owner was just a little

faster with a gun than my boy. Buried him on the hill next to his mother, me and the sheriff and the priest. Been alone ever since. Just the cattle that bring in less money every season, and an old cat with so much arthritis riddled through her bones I want to cry when I watch her walk across a room. Every time the wind howls another chunk of my roof flies off. More bills from the goddamn government than I know what to do with. Young fools messing on my land, burning crosses, firing automatic weapons. These days—I got nothing to hope for. But still I manage to worry. Especially today. Especially now.

All day I had a bad feeling, like there was something wrong with the air, the taste of water on my lips, the color of the sky. Every time I touched something metal I got a shock so big I could see it, a blue bright spark, like everything in the world was charged up, ready to explode. I watched the flowers in my garden turn black and sag; I watched clouds streaked with colors I couldn't even name roll in from the West and hang there like an all mighty new ocean, filling every corner the sky, frothing and churning, waiting.

Then the storm broke.

Never seen anything like it.

Trees ripped to starved naked limbs in minutes, cattle bawling and screaming. The wind lashed the house. The house groaned with pain. Twister, I thought, and like a fool I went out to save what I could of the herd. But this wasn't any storm—the second I saw the sky I knew in my heart I still had plenty to worry about. Because the sky had turned slaughterhouse; there were flames up there, in the clouds, flames and cannons and thousands of figures, doing battle, waging war, killing each other. Like swarms of fireflies gone berserk. “Oh my sweet Jesus,” I heard myself say, and that's when I found her. Damned near tripped over her, twig-thin girl thing, naked and pale, steaming and shivering in the center of the crater she had made when she hit the hard Earth. Blood on her lips. Sword at her side. An angel, fallen from the war in Heaven.

It was something political, she tells me now with a shrug, and I have no patience for politics, only destruction. I am an angel of the desolation. They called me in at the last minute. I vanquished more than fifty before I caught fire and fell. Here I am.

Outside, things seem quiet. But I don't trust the silence. I watch this stranger I've rescued pull the blanket close about her

shoulders and cast her mirror-flat eyes through the shadows of my house. She appears amazed by the smallest things: dust, wall paint, insects, smells. The water dripping from the faucet commands her attention for a full sixteen minutes before my head pounds too loudly with all I've seen and all she's said and I stand up and shout, "A war in Heaven, Sweet Jesus!"

Her lips turn downward.

He was no help at all, she says.

I am terrified.

She tells me not to worry.

I smoke cigarettes.

She does, too.

And to pass the time we talk. I tell her of the ranch. I tell her of myself, my family. And sooner or later we get to my son, the one who turned mean, the one who's dead. The words tumble from my mouth, memories, old hopes, what might have been.

"He wasn't born bad," I insist over and over, "he just lost his way."

She listens for long minutes, then interrupts me. *Forget him.*

"I can't," I tell her. "I still love the miserable little prick."

She laughs, the sound innocent as raindrops, but I am

chilled to the center of my soul. She's never been human; she can't imagine what it means.

"Do you know where he is?"

I'm practically begging.

"Do you know where he's gone—?"

"*Why*, she says, as if to a child, *he's right where you left him. On the hill, under the ground.*

She is so beautiful, my eyes ache.

I hate her.

Don't worry! she laughs, but I realize—I still worry. I worry that the sun won't come up, I worry I might become so heartless and still draw breath. And I worry about my poor lost boy, alone in the dirt.

I stand, knocking over the chair.

Where are you going?

"Out," I tell her.

I wouldn't, she says.

But I wrench open the door to the alien dark and march on through. "Going to keep my boy company," I tell her, not caring if she understands—how could she? She don't know. She don't know anything, not about the rain, or the hands that

hold you once or twice in your life, she never turned the pages of a book, or had a baby fall asleep in her lap. I go out into the night, walking hard, breathing deep. This ain't so bad a storm. I've seen worse.



III: FADE

WELL, THAT'S IT. SHE'S GONE.

She's broken her dishes and burned all her dolls, she's flown back to Heaven to kick Christ in the head.

She's left me here, alone.

She won't be back, ever.

"Remember," she said before she left, her ice-pale fingers tracing the scars I'd carved so carefully into my arms, her hands lifting slowly to my chest, my chin, forcing me to look at her. "Remember," she whispered, "*please.*" Her eyes were shot too full of pain to refuse; she'd seen too much of this place and was so desperate to leave I didn't have the courage to tell her: the promise of a junkie is no promise at all.

"I promise," I told her, "I'll remember," I said.

Cowardice is nothing new to me.

I've had my whole life to practice.

So don't be surprised I wasn't able to watch her do her thing—she went to the window and slid up the pane, then paused for a second, staring down into the street.

Finally she turned. “Goodbye, Thomas.”

I could only nod, not trusting my throat.

She raised her foot to the ledge.

I looked away.

And it was if someone had peeled back the ceiling and let the sun come burning into the room, lighting every corner, every crack. The outline of my bones burned through the skin of my hand, and I shut my eyes against the glow, afraid of what else it might reveal; I'd seen too much of myself the last few days, I couldn't take any more. There came a sound like the tearing of fabric, a far off scream of something dying, something being born. Then silence.

“Fade,” I said.

Nothing.

She was gone

I was alone.

I pulled at my hair, went through my pockets. Horns from the street below, thin rhythm of sound. The room held a soiled

mattress and coils of rope; fast food containers, cigarettes, my kit, the needles from last night. I knelt on the floor, did what I needed, stuck it in.

Then I had to go.

I had to get out.

“Goddamn you,” I heard myself say, realizing only distantly I was crying. And I aimed for the door and somehow got through, went stumbling down unlit stairs and into the noise of the street where I was just another skeleton delaying the inevitable. I followed the person in front of me uptown, then walked behind a girl with three dogs back downtown. My reflection in the store windows, I decided, was my one true self. I intercepted radio transmissions. I studied the auras of my enemies, and they were everywhere. And at some point I wondered, Where am I going? What do I do now? I should have gone with Fade, not that she’d offered. I probably couldn’t go anyway. No air up there.

There are spaces in our bodies where entire worlds reside, she’d told me, once.

I looked at the big clock in the sky.

It was almost lunch time.

I went to Avenue D, to the Meth clinic.

“Thomas, you in a *world* of trouble,” my friend Mike told me when I got in line. “That crazy ass chick? She took a dive this morning from a sixth story window, cops already been here, asking ‘bout you, *bad* scene! Take off, man!”

“No, it’s not like that,” I told him. “She didn’t belong here.”

Laughter from the other guys in line. Mike shook his head, tried to lead me away.

“No, I mean it,” I said, “she wasn’t from here, man. She told me. She came from another place. She spoke to the dead. She was nine thousand years old, she built the pyramids one afternoon when she was bored. And then she went away for a long, long time, she went to places we can’t even imagine. And then she came back, almost by accident. She hated it. Hated everything she saw. She said it was all eat, eat, eat, just a long ugly chain of dust to bacteria to bones, she said it was a nightmare planet and she hoped we’d all die screaming—well, no, she didn’t *mean* that, she was just saying it the night we met. She was in pretty rough shape. I took her to my room. In the dark her body was luminous, man. Later she told me I was the only one who had been kind to her, and she wanted me to remember that, remember it forever. But she couldn’t stay, she

didn't *belong* here, man."

I smiled as I finished, suddenly so very happy.

I had remembered.

Mike shook his head.

"She's meat, man. She belong to the *worms*, now."

But he was wrong.

Because in the dark, when we'd held each other, when I swam in the world that was her body, I knew she'd never die. How could she die if she'd never been born?