

Four Ladies of the Apocalypse

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THIS YOU MUST encompass in your minds. This happens in the distant past, in the distant future. This happens now.

Gigantic epochs carved by cthonian eccentricity into threatening hieroglyphs of basalt. Bizarre and byzantine centuries laid underfoot like lithic linoleum. The air itself, unbreathed by those four ladies progressing there, a condensation of smoke and wormwood and volcanic eructations. For eyes in skulls, little visibility. For senses in carapaces, little actuality.

Just to progress there was to have to part the foliage of an enduring entropy. It painted itself dull brown, yellowy green, mucus red, ocher, all shades of inelegant excretas. Through these mazes the ladies made their way, four ladies and one more, on foot, untiring, undeterred.

An archway of bone was formed of intertwined figures, in which hooves, breasts, heads, haunches, horns, cogs, coils, carburetor, calves, thighs of enormous size, faces, femurs, the hind quarters of nightmares, all as if designed by some paralytic psychotic Polish painter. Through this enticing arch the four ladies passed, to music of a daring discordance.

In a glorious garden where, on a placid lake, an ebony sloop lay moored, a diligent sun focused its gentlest rays on a group of persons at picnic. They sat on the greenest grass ever devised. Among them, his fundament protected from contact with the ground by four silkette cushions, sat the world's last and greatest dictator.

His companions, lovely and lissome and of alter-nating sex, were all simulacra. They turned their artificial heads to unsee the four approaching ladies and one more.

"We are picnicking of cheese and fruit," said the dictator in a subdued bellow. "The fruit is pear and raspberry, the cheese Dolcelatte, the bread ground-down bones of my nearest and dearest. Will you join me, ladies, before you are exterminated for encroaching on my sacred preserves?" The noise of his converse was slipped between the speed of his speech.

He laughed in a falsetto, although his face, the product of surgery,

was of deep red and testicular purple.

Then spoke the four ladies in turn. Said the first formidable dame, whose thin form was clad in armor, "Sir, we are unable to fear your threats since you are a mere byproduct of our designs. We are agents of destruction, whereas you are just a figment of destruction."

The second lady spoke in a deep tone from the depths of a great metal helmet, from which only the glint of her yellow cat eyes could be seen.

"Sir, we come to you on foot because our patrons, the four horsemen, are worn out by constant activity over many centuries. Likewise, their four steeds are ground down to shadows."

"You should have stayed away," said the dictator. His speaking voice was deep with hints of fathomless seas and the monstrous forms living there. "In this place you will be decapitated when you have had your meaningless say."

Then spoke the third lady, a skeletal creature who wore only a plastic loincloth, exposing her worn and useless breasts. "I am the agent of starvation in the world. My name is Famine. What my sisters of war have failed to exterminate, my agency lays low. What was once a world of plenty is now a field of ashes and corpses. This you have achieved, in collaboration with many men as wicked as you, if not as powerful."

"No one is as powerful as I," said the dictator. An element of uncertainty was discernable in his voice, as he surveyed the four phantasmal females, and the one other, before him.

The fourth lady was an upstanding ghoul of dried and withered skin, from which fountains of pus erupted. She spoke now in a shrill whisper. "Our male predecessors rode on four horses, a white, a red, a black, and my predecessor on a pale horse. I am the ultimate of the four and my name is Pestilence. All dread things find termination with me. All great senators and ministers finish in a pile before my feet, their cells smoldering like candle ends. I have but to breathe on you and you will slowly deliquesce."

"You have no breath left to breathe, you vile hag!" roared the dictator. But then the fifth guest spoke, a childish figure with long crinkly fair hair and a face carved from a small pumpkin. "I am but a child," it said in a mouse voice. "I am brought to you to tell you that all you have achieved in the name of ruin is solely because you are the culmination of the wicked aspect of

the human race, of those who have no feeling for the suffering of others. My name is Empathy and I am already dead.”

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“THEN YOU SHALL be dead again,” roared the dictator, casting aside his Dolcelatte sandwich and jumping to his feet. He snatched up a great sword that had been lying ready by his side. This he swung with all his might. This sword he loved more than all his weapons of mass destruction, for this sword brought him close to the moments of the deaths of others. He could savor the deaths, he could taste them on his blade. Other deaths were mere abstractions.

But these ladies would not die. They were themselves mere abstractions. Hack them apart, slice through their skulls, slice off their limbs—they instantly reformed. As they reformed, they uttered hideous laughter. They did not suffer, they could not bleed.

He swung the savage blade and continued to swing. He never tires. He swings that blade yet.

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