

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/1

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**Lamplight**

*'All things change to fire, and fire exhausted falls back into things'*  
(Heraclitus)

A steady stream of translucent snot dripped from her upper lip as the heart's core of the tree burned as only a pine knot could. As the denim on her left knee collected the drops, the girl watched as the decades of resin in the fatwood came to burning life as the sun drifted behind the mountains. She thought of a rough definition of life and tried to bestow it upon the flames:

Breathing-Check

Eating-Check

Releasing Waste-Check

Capacity to think and make choices....

So near, so far. But if anything had manic character and ravaged as much as it inspired, it was fire. Through fire, death found an airy resurrection in a moment of incense. Now the dark roots that once fed the tree with life were ignited in a bright burial in the sky. A proper death took decades to prepare for and a single night to begin and end. The pine cones cast a pulsing orange glow in the flames and looked like eggs in the nest of an impossible Phoenix. Leucothoe wiped her nose with the back of her left hand and looked up at the Hesperian sky. Just behind her, her tired mule gave up on grazing and looked up with eyes like dark stars.

"The ambrosia ain't goin' anywhere, Phaedra. And you're gettin' fatter than a legless hog and lazier than a dead turtle," Leucothoe said to the dark-eyed mule. "But just look at that. Ice in the sky looks like it's on fire. Too hot to the eyes and too cold to think about. What the hell are we supposed to do, huh? Just look somewhere between? I reckon where you're prone to lookin'. Down at the ground where the good stuff grows. Still can't figure how you're so scared of fire. Ain't even cold but it still feels good. Love you anyway, Fee-fee."

Just as the longleaf pine was succumbing to the fire, the town of Hesperia had dissolved before Leucothoe could walk. Her parents followed when the blood started appearing in sprays when they coughed. Fire wiped their existences from the face of the world before the girl could begin to wonder about Death and its many forms. She was the last Hesperian left and her mule's muzzle was turning white. The rest of the world was somewhere. For Leucothoe, it was nowhere. Just as the cirrus clouds turned the last of the daylight to deep oranges and purples, a ribbon of smoke appeared just over the ridge where rock turned back to trees.

"Yeah, I see it you ole' curmudgeon," Leucothoe whispered to Phaedra. "Don't you go runnin' off now while I'm lookin'. Not that you would. Tired as we both are. Zeus!," she yelled, looking up at the first stars of night. "You son of a bitch who sees all things...my hands ache. Weight a' the whole world on our shoulders, Fee-fee. The whole goddam world."

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After Leucothoe fetched her lantern from the saddle, she kissed Phaedra on her muzzle and whispered words in her good ear that only the girl and the mule could understand. By the time she had lit the lantern, it was already dark and the ribbon of smoke to the west was joined by a soft glow obscured by the mountain terrain. As she walked, she looked back and could barely make out the shadow of her friend, a flick of the ear the only thing indicative of life.

When the wind picked up as she scrambled up the ridge, an unfamiliar aroma piqued her senses. There was a resinous quality she recognized but the accent was something new. It smelled of earth from far away, a place across the sea she had only dreamed of visiting. The faint smell of apples and spice conjured the image of a Sunday afternoon after her parents gave offerings to the gods. She imagined being born somewhere else and smelling her way home.

In the midst of a ring of white oaks, a small fire burned blue. Leucothoe's eyes watered giving the scene the look of something magical. She wanted to cry for something found but the incense conjured false tears too copious to contend with. When she rubbed her eyes with her fists, she felt like a little girl trying to hide what was already evident. Her eyes focused and she saw her.

"Don't be frightened," the woman said to the fire.

"I didn't mean to just...just walk right up and give you a start," Leucothoe stuttered.

"This fire is for you," the woman smiled. "Give it time. Your eyes will adjust."

"Pardon me...I just been talkin' to Phaedra for the last...five years. She's real quiet so I'm not used to hearin' anything said back. She's real strong though. Pretty hairy but she's real mean when she needs to be. Big ole' ears and a crooked back but she's still prime. At least twice my size and—"

"You mean your mule?"

Leucothoe cursed to herself as she looked down at the dark earth. When she looked back up, she could see the woman beyond the voice. Her long limbs reminded the girl of those beams of light the sun cast through smoke in the evening. She was dressed like a disheveled goddess and bountiful red hair seemed like a natural attribute of her face that shined like high summer. But the way she reclined against the rock looked like water if it could take a form beyond filling another.

"How did you know about my mule?" Leucothoe muttered.

"Oh, I see all things. Not to mention, I can smell it on you," the woman smiled.

"You're not from around here. I can tell by your talkin'. What's your name?"

"I am here."

"Well, sure you are, but—"

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"Even the sun retreats. What do you think it does when you can't see it?"

"Shines, I guess," Leucothoe said, staring at the blue fire.

"And how do you know that?"

"Cause I just figure it does. It does what it does when it shines somewhere else."

"That's the best answer yet. But it doesn't make it right."

"Is that what you do? Go around makin' blue fires and askin' who's left what they think the sun's up to when it sets? What's in that fire anyway? Smells like nothing I've—"

"I saw it all before it took hold. I warned them but none of them listened," the woman said as the fire crackled.

"So you see the future?"

"I see what is beneath me and I know what it will become. But the rest of them up there have ears without hearing and eyes without sight. A passing cloud is more moving than them."

"Never thought I'd hear about the gods again. Thought they was just in books."

"Now they are. But you are the one."

"I'm somethin'," Leucothoe laughed, holding her lantern a little higher.

"The only one left."

"Well, not really. There's still Phaedra and you."

"The only one. The best of them."

"Of who?"

"The beauty of the world."

"You okay," Leucothoe said, stepping closer to the fire.

"I will return to the shape I am and take you with me."

"My uncle took stuff that made him think that. But I—"

"Look."

Through the firelight, the woman became her mother. The tattered garments remained the same but those eyes that were ashes looked at Leucothoe with a lifetime of memories in their irises. The form of her mother remained on the rock and her face turned to regret with a smile.

"I have a secret," her mother said.

"Mamma?" Leucothoe cried.

"Yes."

"But how could you... Am I dreamin' or—"

"Respect my time to speak."

"You sound like you. How come ya' don't hug me or somethin'?"

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"I know you feel alone, grounded here on this mountain. But one day you will touch the sky."

"I guess if I'm ashes one day the wind'll take me up there. Where did ya' come from? Up there? Is daddy up there, too?" She whispered, taking another step closer to the fire.

"There is no up or down. Only here. I am here."

"Me too. But everything always is."

"Come a little closer to me so that we can see each other speak."

Leucothoe took another step closer as she stared at her mother. She felt disembodied as if her head were floating in space. The fire hissed and the smell of wet wood burning joined the incense. Beyond the blue fire, her mother beckoned the girl to come closer with a twitch of her eyes. As Leucothoe began to take another step, the mountain called out.

'Eeeee—eeee—HEE-HAW!'

Leucothoe looked back and saw nothing but the silhouettes of the trees but she knew the voice. The rest of her body rejoined her head and she felt a searing heat on her toes. When she looked down, she saw the tips of her boots burning in the fire. She leaped to her side and kicked her leather boots into the damp earth. As they hissed, she stood up and held the lantern before her. Through the soft light, the figure of her mother was nothing but the ragged garments in the form of what was wearing them. When she leaned closer to the blue fire, her mother appeared. Then the figure stood and walked towards her.

"I make the things grow though my hands are impotent," the voice of her mother and the woman before said in unison. "I make—"

When Leucothoe threw her lantern into the blue fire, it turned red just as the figure stepped into it. If the setting sun screamed as the mountains slowly consumed it on a clear day, it would have sounded like the figure screaming as the flames reclaimed it. But it was not flesh that burned. It was a renunciation of form. Nothing but the tattered garments remained as the fire consumed itself. Leucothoe was transfixed by the pulsing of the dying embers, like jewels giving up their shine. A wet nose parted her left arm from her side.

"That's my gal. How ya' doin' Phaedra. I reckon you spoke the only true thing tonight," Leucothoe smiled, rubbing the mule's muzzle and scratching her intelligent ears.

After the embers died out, Leucothoe fetched the clothes from the fire and shook out the ashes. Not a string of the ancient garments was singed. When she held them up, something fell to the earth. Leucothoe picked it up and held it to the night sky. It was a little smaller than her fist and pitch black. Pinpricks of stars glittered throughout with some kind of regularity like clusters of galaxies.

After she buried it—the hole she dug for it far deeper than it needed to be—she climbed on top of Phaedra for the first time in months. The mule shook her ears in approval. Leucothoe felt like the tattered garments were tailored just for her as she relished in the feel of wearing them for the first

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time. It felt like they had always been hers just like songs could be, new and always. She smiled as they began their descent into the open country where the mountain met that place where ambrosia was liable to grow. She knew Phaedra was hungry. As she felt the old strength of the mule beneath her, just as the sun should have been rising, Leucothoe laughed as she pointed ahead and yelled:

“I am she who sees all things!”