

Intersection

a fairytale

by Edith Lyre

Misfira of the Accendi was the worst at everything, worse than every other Accendal. On the day of their Maturing – an occasion three times delayed, due first to illness, second to forgetfulness, and third to an attack of anxiety, spurred by their shame at having missed the earlier two – they were charged with doing anything, anything at all, so long as they truly meant it and it spoke, in some part, to a thing they cared about. They crossed the floor of the amber-bright grove, climbed the steps of the ancient, leaf- and bark-strangled stage, and elbows propped against the many-hands-polished, reddish-brown podium, parchments inked and laid across the lectern, read a poem. Nobody of that generation of the Accendi ever heard a worse one.

Ever the kindest people, unbeset by wars or strife and wanting for nothing among the evergiving forests and nourishing creeks of their domain, the Accendi had little use for dishonesty.

Kindness was the truth of them, and kindness imperilled them not at all. That did not, one rushes to clarify, mean dishonesty was unheard of. Indeed, some pronounced it with compulsion, and near-all told fables, spun mistruths to the amusement of every other. The attendees of Misfira's Maturing told Misfira, thus, in terms most certain, that their poem – a thing, it was evident, Misfira intended as an exposé about the realities of their mistreatment and neglect at the Accendi's hands, a cutting revelation of what it is to suffer, as they did suffer, a mental ailment no person sees – operated if anything as a confessional. "The thing," spoke Eld Faenichth, the newest of the Accendi's Elds, a rising star at the council-meets, "if its action can really be called an operation, and if but by accident, operates as a confessional. A long rota of helps offered and proofs of spite as the force behind those helps' refusal, alongside baffling detours that cast doubt on the author's very comprehension of reality, what, when those detours count six instances of a fellow Accendal demonstrating their empathy, showing Misfira – pardon, showing the speaker – that their ailment is not invisible, and rather, is well-understood, in fact, by those close to them, and for a few moments, I and..." Eld Faenichth looked about herself, to confirm so, "everyone else not only supposed it satire, but were so thoroughly convinced as to be surprised, a bit impressed, until the poem dragged on, on, on, reiterating points in a way that, ironically, further dismantled the arguments those points were trying to sell, and the minutes piled, the hour festered, the thing became repugnant, until – what, all the audience being subjected to something so disgusting, so unpleasant, so uselessly long – our impression of the poem as a breakthrough of empathy was shown to be unwarranted. It is, in fact, a catastrophic failure of empathy, technically worse than amateurish. Its technics show an aggressive resistance to instruction or imagining one's native voice susceptible to flaw, passing remarkable in view of the author's voice being the ugliest I or any of us can call to memory, possessed of not quite so much a tonal chaos as a miraculous tonal presence, as a doorway part-obstructed by an overwide cabinet. One feels a need to squeeze, scrape around, but then, finds only stink and rot. Pillowcases next to pillows, as though tossed there years ago and never fitted, the labour too great, and – upon the far shore of that wreckage, that

disordered, nauseating semi-order – a pair of floating, angry, angry, angry eyes watching one’s own, condemning you for the mere act of seeing. In the author’s voice,” said the Eld, “dwells a sliver of a presence, a presence which only worsens the great absence, ensures the rot and chaos achieve harm, pure harm, and not even a generative kind of harm.” But, following some discussion, Eld Faenict and the panel agreed, to their astonishment and repulsion, a revelation accompanied by a slick oozing along the skin and sense of encasement so entire one could not even shudder, Misfira’s poem did nonetheless speak to something Misfira truly cared about, and was sincere. Thus, another Accendal was greeted to adulthood.

Misfira cried for twenty-five days, and did otherwise nothing for several months thereafter. Eventually, though, the truth was clear enough, and Misfira strong enough to look that truth in the face. They were not good at poetry. They were not good at empathy. And they did not love their fellow Accendi as much as their fellow Accendi loved them. Admitting this was the hardest, most impressive thing Misfira ever accomplished. Over the next decade, Misfira did their best, turning their hand to the Accendi’s other needs. Misfira’s best was very bad, however.

Among the many, many miracles boasted by the Accendi’s forest was the Springing of the Sweetbulbs, a period of about a week near the settling of May when every flower of the Jassia family burped forth a host of buoyant, variably floating and bouncing, muscular bubbles of sweet, meat-like fruitskin in marvellous blues and purples, filled with a fragrant mist that, on exposure to air, contracted to a delicious, violet milk. These bulbs dashed along the forest’s currents, flitted here and there, albeit slowly enough that – given good boots and steady footing, over the root-knuckled and leaf-strewn detritus – almost anybody would catch one if they pursued it. There was little esteem in it, but, because some sweetbulbs were narcotic and all reeked of sugar and berry-freshness, the task was never entrusted to children. Every year, when the season washed in, Misfira – who elsewhere got in the way – was assigned to the hunt. But, for ten years, every harvest had disappointed, growing more meagre each year. Everybody knew this was Misfira’s fault, the others

turning from their duties to assist them, disentangle them from ferns and the limbs of trees or console them after abrasions or other skin-depth ailments. Misfira knew it, too. In every activity, every labour the Accendi required, Misfira's involvement never but impeded. The Accendi nonetheless assured them, and did so honestly, that Misfira's value was not derived of their usefulness: they loved Misfira and Misfira was valuable in of herself, mattered in of herself, was an end in of herself. This satisfied them, more or less, for ten years until a kernel of need, or moral urgency, burst from within and spoke one command: Misfira must become more than herself, contribute something that would not otherwise have been contributed, lest their mental ailments outpace their cognition and their mind roil until nothing endured but pain, fear, and – somewhere at the edge and back – a scarce relic of consciousness, serving no end but the torture's exaggeration. There would be no escaping such a condition, and once manifest, the condition would remain.

Misfira consulted their friends, not loved ones as such (love was an enduring difficulty for Misfira), but those among the Accendi who loved them most, who they trusted most. The problem, everybody agreed, was real. Discussion was pressing. There would be a lot of it, like as not, and it would, like as not, be separated by days of mulling, days of nothing except unconscious working-through, and so on, but when anything new arose, or even when it did not, all promised to get back to Misfira. At last, though, Misfira had a thought all their own, and called around their friends to hear it. Though busy, four friends made the time, entered to Misfira's giant-tuber-domicile, spread their reedy, Accendish bodies throughout the vast, dug-in living space, dappled wan, canopy-light atremble with tendrilled silhouettes, furry, mammalian vines draping every window. Four, they insisted, was about the number Misfira should expect, not more. "I really think this is quorum," said Batherly, the eldest of the group.

"Let's say it's quorum, then, alright," said Misfira. "Does everybody remember the really awful poem I read, that day at my Maturing?"

Mislaily, Misfira's "daymate" (a title for a person born the same day, imparting some familial bondage and kinship), spoke next. "Not the poem itself as I and probably everybody else have semi-wilfully forgotten it, but I remember what was said about it, and that you read it. I remember the disgust I felt."

"I meant: whether people remember how awful it was, how lacking in empathy, how appalling its use of my interiority was, how I turned my uselessness into actually a weapon against you all, gave it a kind of dark use by reinventing the waste of myself as a kind of violence rather than owning the simple not-good, not-a-good-thing, waste-as-waste aspect of who I am."

Everybody nodded, yes. Who could forget.

"I'm still the same, aren't I? Don't leap to reply. It's why I wanted to talk, even though there's only four of you."

"Four's about--"

"Yes, four's about what I should--"

"Four's about what you should expect – which you were about to say."

"Which is what I was about to say."

"Don't be angry at Mavie, Misfira. You know he has difficulty with not finishing his thoughts. And he's the first to acknowledge the hurt that causes. But we've talked about it and talked about the difficulty he has, not finishing his thoughts, and it hurts us so little, but demands so much strain from him. You were there."

"I was there, wasn't I?"

"We all agreed he should keep finishing his thoughts, even if it would be rude for somebody else to do."

"Thank you, Batherly."

“Of course, Mavie.”

“Sorry, Mavie.”

“It’s okay, Misfira.”

“I wanted to talk to everybody because I wanted to talk about the problem of my existence not having value – sorry, use: I understand my existence has value: I mean use – and about how my agency will become separated from my consciousness if I don’t address it. I will start to coast, I worry – start to act with the same immediacy as a flower. My mind will retreat to some other place unable to direct anything I do. I have a strong intuition that that’s the case, that that’s what will happen.”

“Is this something anyone’s ever seen?” asked Durthein, who until now had held their tongue.

“It is,” said Batherly. “It affects people of other nationalities – as they refer to themselves, those peoples not of the Accendi – more often than it affects us. But that’s not to say it doesn’t affect us at all. It’s rare, but every several generations, a situation arises. Eld Faenichth tells, in her time, of a child whose consciousness could be kept alight only by the causing to others of pain: as sometimes sickness is born in the springstem of a new tree, and the tree will never be good nor bear for its cousins anything but wasting and dissatisfaction, so in this child was the craving to harm inborn, and Nature’s demand on it was that it either inflict such harm or cease to be a person, clip into an unthinking groove as do many citizens of the outer nations. Do you know of this child, Misfira?”

“Eld Faenichth intimated something of its story to me, including what became of it. I don’t think it’s the ideal example for my situation, but at least you see it’s real, the concern about my consciousness?”

Everybody nodded.

“I’m not good at anything.”

Again, everybody nodded.

“I’m good at some things.”

Everybody smiled brightly and tilted their heads a ways forward, toward the arc of a nod, but no further, as not to lie.

“I’m not good at some things or at anything, but I matter, but maybe it’s a problem that I matter, because it’s good when things get done well – when good things happen, it’s good. But I don’t make good things happen, even if I am a good thing.” Misfira scanned their friends’ faces, the baffled exhaustion in them, the vicious lust for an end to the conversation and the grateful revelation of just how deeply and utterly each treasured their free time and the hours of their own life, shown to them now in the ache to return to it. “So, I think to do something good, there’s something I could do, but it would, a bit, be a contradiction, or maybe not. The difficulty is, well, if I matter, how much do I matter? And if I try as hard as I can, how much harm can I keep myself from inflicting? I’ll inflict some.”

“You want to die,” said Mavie.

“Want? If I wanted to, there might be less contradiction, but I want to do something good, and if I keep living I won’t. I never have and never will. But there’s this I can do. I can compare how much harm I’ll do if I go on and how much harm I’ll do if I don’t. I’m never even happy. The ailment’s here still. My depression’s never fixed. I don’t think my life’s quite as valuable as other people’s, certainly not as, like, Mislaily’s, and that’s— I won’t say it’s okay, because it’s a reason I should die, but it’s not a complex fact, I think I mean.”

A dull tickling flickered in Misfira’s friends’ crossed knees and deadening legs. Every one of them yearned after Misfira’s absence, to get quick away and return to this dialogue at a later date. It was an infuriating, pointless, unserious discussion after all. Each repeated five times that

metricating value-points was no way to make ethical decisions or decisions about one's life and as a matter of fact whether or not one valued one's own life was a question – perhaps the only question – one could confront in a vacuum without any foolishness. They would talk more soon.

Dashed – out from the drear and grim of Misfira's hovel – into the stark heat and astonishment of the afternoon sun, all stretched in the light and applied themselves to their favourite diversions, albeit with an implacable restlessness in their guts, a slight liftedness to the hairs on their arms. Days later, by some unplanned intuition, Batherly, Mislaily, Mavie, and Durthein ran into each other, accompanied by no one else, at a fourway forest crossing and, each looking into the others' eyes, could not but face it. The mandate that one should think about selfhood in a vacuum yet disregard the results of any calculation incorporative of data from without the vacuum was a relativist abomination: in a vacuum, there was no "from without." It was all apropos in the dark-dark, and if Misfira stepped loose of the shadows with a metric, even one that tested the moral substance of their own existence and found it wanting, it was nothing but dishonest to say the conclusion was ill-considered or Misfira's interpretation of its material consequences unsound. They did not treat fairly with Misfira, and were startled by their own falsehood.

"But isn't it unkind?" said Mavie, after nobody at the crossing spoke for some ten minutes, sharing nothing but eye contact. All were adults, though, and none were shocked to recall that the marriage of kindness and honesty was not always a happy one, despite that marriage's fundamental role for their culture. Misfira's words were worthy of respect and – no matter how unusually, for them – made sense. In agreement, so, all returned to the crossing in the early evening and from there walked together to Misfira's house.

"We will ask how they want to die," said Batherly.

"They will interrupt to say they don't "want to" then start blathering about the distinction between wanting-to and thinking-they-should," said Durthein, wisely.

“Hm.”

“Let’s not leave the thinking to them,” said Mislailly. “It would be too cruel. Let’s ourselves suggest a method.”

“Do we just do it?” said Mavie. “Pick a way a between us, tell the Elds what’s going on so there’s no confusion, then kill them?”

“No,” said Durthein, “they want... They think they should have agency in it. Because of the consciousness thing.”

“This will destroy their consciousness anyway,” said Mislailly.

“It’s about being trapped, I would assume, fear of a trapped consciousness, not about retaining consciousness as such.”

“What do they mean with this consciousness thing, anyway? Like intelligence or qualia or free will or what?”

“Really, I’ve got no idea, but that’s how it is with words.”

Their chatter trickled and, stepping onto the clearing around Misfira’s gorgeous, autumn-themed dwelling, bounded by rich-coloured, tasteful overgrowth, at last quieted altogether. Batherly knocked and, when no answer came, all bent into the cool and shade, minding to wait for Misfira’s return. But Misfira was home, despite the unanswered knock, sat against a wall with spurts of heavy, leaf-red blood bursting from odd-chosen holes, the lowest two ribs on the lung’s side, the low left corner of the neck, and crisscrossed x’s up and down each last limb: the strangest wounds any suicide – as seen by any Accendal of any generation – ever made. “This must have hurt so much,” said Mavie.

“They could not have done a worse job,” said Mislailly, and everybody agreed.