

Zzaj

It was during a period of research, which for initial fruitlessness was extended by half again its initial time, and which now, because of continued fruitlessness, had led Japeth out of the old European libraries and back to Des Moines, that he started noticing depictions of bridges, and temporarily forgot his search for evidence of jazz (or as he called it, “transparent music”) in the 16th century, in Europe. What he noticed about the depictions of bridges was that they were almost always distinctly wrong. He did not have much art history, but was not kept from recognizing that in these recurrent murals and rococo-framed acrylic paintings, generally found in Mexican or Indian restaurants where he liked to think and sweat, a depiction of a bridge—especially a footbridge—was an extremely common theme, and that the perspective invariably made either the river seem to stand up on one edge, or made the background, a town or mountain to which the bridge led, float, or moreover, that the perspective propped the background up on the apparent single column of the selfsame bridge. He had begun a series of photographs of these depictions and often found himself thumbing through them on his phonescreen with a sense of satisfaction deep enough to unsettle him. This ubiquitous mistake was though, of course, an example of transparent art, and that was reassuring.

Despite the relative unsuccess in his research of transparent music, the libretto for Japeth’s opera on the same subject was almost halfway written. He had begun it in the dusty, vaulted Royal Library in Turin, where he had found nothing, not even a clue pointing toward promising blacked-out lines. Apparently not even any censorship had been done on the subject. Success or unsuccess, he should have expected he would put pen to paper in the Royal Library. It

sent his thoughts up, like a flock of pigeons flapping around the ceiling far above the book stacks, turning and disappearing over and over in half circles.

Before writing he had read a treatise on Wabi-sabi, and decided that while the two were different, the Japanese aesthetic world-view and his newer theory of transparent art appealed to the same tenant. To imperfection. Fragment: the universal omnipresence. Wabi-sabi appealed through work of time; the other appealed through lack of mastery.

Japeth truthfully did not listen to all that much jazz. And knowing there were academic and professional experts in the genre, he was apprehensive to come out with which jazz he did regularly listen to. But he also felt confident that the ultimate mastery of a genre could never really be as exciting as its beginning. There is a reason that so few listen to classical music written this year, the same reason for exclusively classic rock stations. So on a certain level—an important level—Japeth cared only for the seed of jazz—the first wrong note intentionally introduced to a European instrument. The rhythms of jazz—he did not deny their importance, not for a second—were less exciting *because* of their correctness, as far as he was concerned. Millennia had been spent exploring every rhythm imaginable, and it was on the canvas of this admittedly long-growing, admittedly tall, snowy, frozen peak that the bright colors of what he considered jazz had been splashed.

It Turin, when he had begun writing, he had thought to himself, *very well, it will be entirely a work of fiction*. But, he also decided, nothing was ever really fiction. Human beings being just too similar for that. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that there had to have been some small movement of jazz—transparent music—in every period of history.

His own name was an example of transparency. There was, of course, the biblical figure *Japheth*, which was enough origin for most people, but not him. His parents had accidentally, or intentionally, used a modernized variation that subtracted an ‘*h*,’ and also made it into a conjugation of the verb *jape*. Which meant to mock, and was unlikely, but potentially—and Japeth had intentionally never looked into it—connected to both *ape* and *joke*. *Jape*. And *japeth* was indeed a correct, if antiquated, conjugation.

And amazingly, or because of human beings’ underrated capacity to apply even marginal interpretations, Japeth embodied his name, mocked many things, and held much of the world in a muscular irony that it had yet to struggle out of.

The opera begins a few hours before an important concert that Luis, Prince of Achaea himself is attending. Piero, young but technically accomplished is practicing his shawm in his room at his parents’ townhouse. Across the hall, in *his* room, Piero’s younger brother Guidobaldo is practicing his lute, for the aim of impressing a visiting English girl by the name of Basemath. Guidobaldo does not have his brother’s talent. When Piero’s good friend Carlo stops by to wish him luck in his concert he pauses for a moment in the hallway. The two brothers, in their opposite rooms, cannot hear each other, but amazingly they are playing in the same key. Carlo listens, first for a break in Piero’s lines that would make it appropriate to knock, but then, after the opportunity comes and passes, is listening because of the *effect* this strange combination has on him. Piero accomplishes well-timed, well-pronounced melodies, while Guidobaldo’s lute stumbles, losing time to get a note right, or playing a wrong note to keep the tempo, and he sings along in an out-of-key, mumbling way. Carlo listens for a full ten minutes, and then Guidobaldo stops playing, leaving his brother’s sublime shawm unhindered, virtuosic. But it has lost something. There had been a third voice, something easy to detect but nearly absent, not

Guidobaldo's singing, something else that had disappeared with the prolonged caesura of the lute. The voice was one that Carlo had only ever heard before in one or two moments of total rapture during masses. Then Guidobaldo came out and interrupted his thought and Carlo went into Piero's room, interrupting him in the middle of a very difficult and important run of notes.

"I'm surprised to see you here," said Julius at the reception, at the gallery, in Des Moines. "I heard from Lauren that you were doing research in Europe."

"Oh, yes. I was," said Japeth. "But it wasn't panning out. I was writing an opera."

"Oh really?" said Julius.

"I still am, actually. The libretto is almost finished."

"Oh," said Julius. "I should put you in touch with Brian Graves. He teaches at UDM, he's a composer."

"Really. That would be wonderful," said Japeth. "He's here?"

Julius shook his head. "No. He usually parties on the weekend."

Japeth laughed and looked around the gallery and asked whether this was not a party.

Julius laughed too. "He likes to go to clubs. Nightclubs. Strip clubs. We could go find him if you want. He shouldn't be hard to track down."

Japeth agreed to go look for Brian, and the two men finished their plastic cups of chenin blanc.

“Hey, look at these,” Japeth said, and showed Julius his collection of bridge pictures. Julius nodded, approvingly.

Brain Graves did not answer his phone so they took a cab to a place he and Julius had been before together. The night was humid, but cool. The club had no sign or marquis, but a short line, which ended at the crossed arms of the bouncer was enough. They went to the front of the line and told the bouncer that wanted to find out whether their friend was inside. The bouncer said they should call him. They told him Brian wasn't picking up, to which he shrugged and became silent. But just then a party of four came out of the club, and the bouncer let the next group enter, and after that there were only two people left in line, so Julius and Japeth decided to wait. Ten minutes later they paid their cover charge and went inside. The space was like the very womb of rock'n'roll itself, Japeth thought, noise, light, gar, and writhing, reptilian pole-dancers

They got drinks that glowed under the black lights and walked around looking for Brian Graves.

“What does he look like?” Japeth shouted.

But Julius had spotted someone and beckoned Japeth to follow. It was quieter in the booth where the man sat with a few companions, about his own age, in their late fifties.

“Are you Brian Graves?” asked Japeth.

The man laughed, pulling his lips back, and said loudly, “You're looking for Brian Graves?”

Julius greeted the man and they sat and drank for a while, until Julius was visibly drunk and had pulled the front of his shirt and tie loose, so that his hairy collarbone showed. Japeth too,

was becoming drunk, and he and the woman he was sitting beside had struck up conversation of a sort.

“Why do you want to find Brian?” she asked.

Japeth told her he was writing an opera and she said, “He’s the guy then.”

“He writes good stuff?” Japeth asked.

“Very good stuff. I like it a lot,” she replied, and said she knew where they could find him.

She and he left together and got into the back seat of a cab. For a moment Japeth wondered, suspected, believed, that—

“What is your name?”

“Lisa,” would route the taxi to her house, not to Brian Graves, that it would take them straight to her bedroom, even though she was a little older than him, and even though her hand felt soft in a way that somehow suggested age, but she gave the address of another club. It was eleven-thirty now.

“So what’s your opera about?” Lisa asked.

“It’s about—well, it’s about music. About imperfection in music, the transparency of performing it. About jazz, basically. But it’s set in the 16th century, in Italy. Pre-Renaissance.”

There was a pause.

“Is it about *learning* music,” Lisa asked.

“Yes, it is about learning music. Sort of.”

“I think there is something incredibly awe-inspiring about learning. But really, about the human life span,” Lisa said. “To picture every iteration of one human at once. It recalls Durga, doesn’t it. Someone once told me, well, he recited a poem that I remember. It went:

In a dream I saw every story,

Every story ever told, rendered onto itself, on the solid earth.

Three real hearts in the space of one real heart,

Tongue in the space of tooth.

And everything collapsed,

A black hole,

Which is why I believe in truth.

But I don’t think that’s relevant. I think truth is the syrup time passes through. So the picture of the human in all its forms, it’s amazing, and it’s possible, if you could only line up with it correctly. Of course it’s more than you can imagine, goes way beyond the Vitruvian Man, say. That complete, perfect view of a human lifespan. I can’t *not* think about *that*. It *is* divinity.”

“Divine beings exist outside of time,” said Japeth.

“Yes, and so keeping track of our changes, our growing, and knowing, and aging, *that* gives us a window into divinity. And, of course, the same thing exists of our mind, but that’s even more difficult to catch.”

She asked whether she could read some excerpts from her writing to him. He said, “Of course,” and she asked if he wanted to kiss first and he said of course, and they kissed for a while and she said, “See. An iteration, a fragment of divinity.”

And he was about to say, *Yes, an unpracticed, imperfect, transparent gesture*, but she said, “And that’s what jazz is too, by the way, a prolongment of a divine moment.”

And then she started reading: “My parents’ marriage was bi-cameral in every sense. From their two bedrooms I perceived a much greater difference than really existed between them, between their mildly conservative natures, or, their restrained liberalism; they had decided to get married, after all, and neither, even when young, had been stunningly vibrant, at least in photographs. I received the same average looks. Ninety percent perfect, or even ninety-five, but when it comes to human beings, anything under eighty-five percent perfect is unbearable. We can’t be pruned like plants.

“In any case I perceived neither of my parents as being much like me, but I thought that of the two I was more similar to my mother, as my father spoke to us both in the same tone of voice. Only later did I realize I was in fact much more like my father, that my mother’s disses and rebukes were just couched more smartly, and that, like my father, I could not stand this in anyone’s speech.”

After she read Japeth showed her his bridge pictures, and at that point they had arrived at the next club, *Balkan Tiger 24*, and they stayed until three in the morning in the churning, peristaltic belly of the club, the night of which ran back three years to when the place had opened, and who knows where before that, and older club, and he and Brian Graves exchanged phone numbers there.

Japeth woke up very late, and maybe for this reason, or maybe from what Lisa had read the night before, he thought about college while he drank his tea.

When he first arrived at the university, the feeling, or rather the self-conscious image he sought to dispel, was of a frost-hardy, cool climate tree or vegetable—the unwanted, unfortunate identity vacillated: apple; broccoli—growing slowly but determinedly in a tropical climate, alongside manifold tropical species, which shot up and produced fruit he had never dreamed might exist. In defense he focused his studies on Medieval Europe.

He had come up with another idea. He was not yet finished with the libretto, but he realized that the unfinished libretto in itself was something akin to transparency, but yet again, something subtly different, and potentially classifiable. And that the tool could easily be distinguished from a cliffhanger by virtue of its relationship to plot reassured him that it was a pure idea, and fresh. For no reason really, he named the device *zzaj*, and stopped writing