

It Puts Forth Itself
or: Capitol Riot 2
or: Lohengrin Redux
By Vivian Z. Hu

It puts forth itself. The second time they enter the Capitol it puts forth for real, there is a great invisible crashing, the dome is still up and still blue but no longer are there the struts and fittings. Everything un-strutted and un-fitted, falls. The Grail falls from the –

And the baths are visible. By 1890 all but two were removed from the old central forum. And they were moved to the new municipal offices where we worked, on the other side of the civil line which rumples through this country, which cuts un-neat and serrated. The senators sit in their water for days and take calls. Two of us per call, which the calls are put on speaker, I hold the phone in a neat arch overhead and Fiberglass Smith stands behind me with his hands over my ears. For privacy. Some of these calls last six hours or more, and by the end there is a near-erotic positioning that we take on, me and Smith.

He ruts. Smith is a rutter. I have known him for a very long time. It is the way we stand over the hard edge of the tub. Each tub a solid block of marble, and our own personal Senator has had miniature marble stalagmites put in the bottom of the basin, scale-accurate to Luray Caverns. It's also the way the phone has to be held, with my wrist clerestoried toward the Senator's mouth, so as to avoid phone and cord contact with water. Our senator has loose skin, little motes of which find their way onto the tub rim, and then onto my pants. Part of this is because of his inactive legs – very little muscle or fat. Also his wheelchair is pushed right up against the tub and I have to stand over that too. So I am positioned to be sort of constantly bending in a way that points my ass right into a sensual Smith rut. I am too polite to tell him that I do not care for him in that way.

When we hear our Senator has died Fiberglass Smith is inconsolable. He literally refuses to be consoled, and since his hands are occupied by being held over his own ears, I am without calls for a week. In this week I suffer a total financial loss. All other Senators have been assigned to. The Department of Baths has a robust internship program. And the death spreads some kind of vague pearlescent grief over us all, which mixes grayly with the steam. None of us can see anything. Sweet Fiberglass trawls the Senator's scent cartridge out of the bottom of the tub and keeps it in his breast pocket.

When he next ruts against me I feel the dim bump against my shoulder blade and cannot bear it. I remove myself. Fiberglass becomes vague and bodiless again, obscured by distance and steam. There is not even the tub as an excuse for his action, which upsets me. Then the grief clears and we see there are no Senators left. The tubs are all drained of water. The only Senator remaining is our own, still laid out and small, white and sort of titrated. Like, sort of dissolved in the bathwater. Which is kept perennially hot by boilers in the ground. He has been separated into all these transparent white fins, which dart around in the heated water, catching light like minnows.

"Oh," says Fiberglass, across the room, where he had went after my truncation of his attempted contact. So he had felt blind for the scent cartridge through what he thought was shed dermis-thick water which was in fact the wet rot of his Senator. And now he smelled like Tropical Mix and also like death.

Where did we hear he had died? And how?

Fiberglass comes over and sits down on the wet carpet beside me. Wet with what. By beside me I mean he is still some distance away. He says that "it was very fast, it was a stroke, and you were still holding the phone up and I couldn't bear the thought of you knowing he was

dead too, no longer touching me. But now I won't touch you. And I won't put my hands on your ears again, if you don't want that. If you don't like it. The last three hours of that call was the person on the other end of the line going hello? Hello? And I just felt you against me. Sorry. I don't know if you know this, but he brought me to the tubs, John. I was in the North before this, on the other side of the line. In an aboveground building, old Raytheon office made of steel and glass, over there they're all made of that, and no one can see grief. There are no underground networks over there. No marble, nothing neoclassical. I was top floor and the only thing between me and the great invisible firmament was the second smaller glass firmament of the blue dome of the building. Pointed straight up and bulging like the lens of a telescope. And at night I would walk the circumference of the office and watch the parallax of lights outside, little points of white light sliding, turning from individual points into rays which would cross one another and make a net of light, little crisscrosses interconnected, before he was my Senator and then our Senator he was my personal Professor X, nightly I would look out and see his name dissolved in the sky, then one day I was not alone in the office, as the sun slid down in the clear blue ether of the sky and I watched our state run to black he appeared in the center of the office and I was no longer in my own loose circle because he was the pinned centerpoint of my circle and I was suddenly or had always been walking in one equidistant line tied to him like a horse tied to a stake in a fairground hoofing and snorting at the ground and he came up to me put his hand against the side of my long animal face and said, whoa there. What I mean is that I was thinking about him so much through the window sending my thoughts out the window and then he was suddenly there. Like all the great Senators of history with a gallic face, knobbed. And that great flaky reflective skin, with the light coming off it. He was not in the dome and then he was in the dome under my lonely second sky I had believed him into place. Or he had believed himself into

place and while touching me he could tell what I was thinking. He could hear it, without ears, and without me speaking, knew what I was thinking. I wanted to do that too and now I can.”

Here Smith stops and sort of collapses forward for a second, with his long gray forearms loped simian in the carpet. It sounds wetly when he touches it. Then he un-collapses and leans back against his tub. And meanwhile it had come invisibly through and most of the tubs were gone. Only two were left, again. Ours, which I was sitting against, and this other Fiberglass Smith one. No one in the office except me and Fiberglass Smith. Heavy marble-gouged dents all around in the carpet between us, in regular disconnected rectangles. And Smith continues,

“When I touch you I can hear you. John, I don’t want what you think I want. All I want is to be touching you, through our clothes, with you holding the phone. I want us to fit against each other. In our own personal John-Fiberglass rut. Your word, rut. Of course I have heard you think it, and it is so much vaguer, stranger, than any human word for it – something very animal in. Rut. The two of us bent over a basin, like farm animals at their feed. Nothing between us and the firmament, except – words. John, give me permission to touch you. We can exist wordless, we can exist neutral and unbiased, unobscured.”

A shaft of light comes in from overhead. We both look up. When the pearlescence of the indirect grief and direct steam had cleared I had not seen that there was no longer any ceiling, no struts or fittings. And the baths are visible to everyone that is left. My secret job has come to an end.

“I give you permission to touch me,” I say, tilting my head backward now against the rim of the tub, so that the shaft of light moves over my face and warms me. “Fiberglass, you can touch me.”

The savages have come through and broken all the buildings on both sides of the line. The line which divides Virginia. Into north and south and into smooth material and this murky underground office full wet and condense. The glass has been broken, the marble has been taken. Forget the story of the Grail, it was really just a shaft of light, and really just a cup. It put itself forth, and the country is over.

Smith has his gray arms outstretched. He is facing me. His hands are on my shoulders. Behind me, the cup falls finally into the tub, and the skinned water splashes onto my back, crashes up, and breaks on the both of us. And there are no more words