

The Tank

The covers are soft and warm, not hot. Stuffed with down. I cannot wake.

In the dreaded white room. Long fingers twist below. Lontano, now whole, reaches through the trapdoor and lifts me out by his sinewy forearm. The new home has warm, brown tones: it is gentle wooden stairwells and dark doors that open up into private, inviting worlds. We enter one and there is a gauntlet of friends and well-wishers, standing and sitting crosslegged, chattering amongst themselves and facing us happily as if we were each the sun upon their faces. The panel mirrors reflect the colorful posters and talismans, the airy openness of the rooms. And all the rooms are like this, they extend out and end in walls only where good green expanses of grass and countryside begin, filled with picnickers and game-players who are jubilant in the ableness of their youth.

Is it that I am too ashamed to wake?
I have slept terribly, and my face hurts.

Steam. I am in the tank, there is fluid and chunks of brain in my hair. I am in the tank. I have always been in the tank. I have had a dream, and we could speak with one another in polemic, Lontano, if we were able to concentrate on any one point for more than a few seconds, speak as to whether the dream was ultimately good. But now, I find myself in the tank, coughing and choking, alone.

He was my most beloved friend, Lontano. We did nothing that men who have shared a confidence, or incidents of faithfulness to one another, would. Or perhaps we did not share the growth of comfort that rises from such fecund soil. I never stood up for Lontano, and he, though well-intentioned, for me. We did not expect it of each other, or even wish it with anything more than a romantic lapse. There was no intentionality.

He left so I could stay, and keep my head something further away from beneath the tile, and take his spot.

I look at what I have written first, very first. Before I jotted down the secret of the tank, that which none have ever recalled but myself, and which follows what I've written here. (All that is left is to begin my sterile history.) It says:

- your access to your own soul is limited
- your own illusory death hems you in on all sides

I would instead write "Immediacies of Your Life," which are in truth my most desperate hopes:

- you are a human being, and your jailors are not
- no one here remembers. Yet remember your dreams, for they are of your life before you came to be here

- escape this place, before it makes your own body a prison. This is worse than death, and every minute drags you closer to it. Leave us at once, and only then have no regrets

Such altruism is still possible in writing, perhaps in speech. What is it when you, from a position of experience, despise and ignore those around you, but depend on them for your occasional amusement and survival - that is, for them not to seek revenge on you? When you have covered up what it is that you are? I live there now. In the tank.

In thought, I struggle towards my splashdown. Perhaps some time in reflection will give me what I need... Jones and Martin had come in just before me, Reeve and two other men just after. That was the sum of my wave. Jones, I remember, saddened me because he was little more than 1,5 meters tall. Martin, his friend, dealt with that mishap and his own adjustment to the tank simultaneously. All throughout, my young, fresh heart begged me to speak, but by the end, hearing everything that he could bear to say, I wished he would sink beneath the water just to relieve me of his complaints.

Reeve alone was strong. What does a soldier of the Republic do, when the itch of the water is new and unwelcome and his body cries out for freedom, because it is still capable? Precisely the thing we ridicule most - observe and plan endlessly, inquire as only to the means which would withdraw one from the tank, and to his advantage. Does he not yet realize that his chances had left him with dry ground underfoot, when he complied with the men leading him on, in a method he assumed to be beneficial to him? Had he trusted others in his waking life? He would quickly learn not to in a basin that, in the midst of being disinfected of men, was populated by the vilest, most cunning examples of them.

Consistently true? Reeve was at once different from the rest of us. He intended to get out immediately, to climb the rough spots where only grouting stood, and that with the bloodied bone of his finger joints. Not too soon after his temper was known, the residents were decided. Acting for them, it was Pearle who tried to kill him, thinking him asleep. We watched as this Pearle glided over to him, tile shivering in his hands, for a moment transfixed before the contemplative, level face. Reeve struck then, and I have never seen anything like it, even so much later - what is the novelty-filled horse that children breach for merriment?

Tall and strong as he was, none faced him head-on thereafter, only mumbling in their removed salons. I decided I would be his follower, for if any could escape (and I knew I must escape from this *place*, whose horrors were still fresh), it was he.

He hurled himself at the wall for cycles. Many slept while his adamantine skin opened in juicy weals and his chest heaved, otherwise silent in exertion. It was some time later that Reeve, completely by his own method, had discovered the way to survive.

Let me set out to you the single, false hope of escape at once - all present know it - and illustrate its elevated point of torture. There is a thin ledge, 30 centimeters long and 2 centimeters or less, protruding, and slick, in the southwest corner. In the wall, a patchiness of broken masonry extending up, rugged enough to be scaled,

were you a neonate to the monotony of the tank. And through the steam, which does not gather at the very limited space directly in the corners, a duct - existing by the word of the elderly - which might be entered whence its product not scald you, and hurl you back down.

I can see his tan, acne-scarred face before me now, if the sun might make a man's face verdant by drawing out his pigment. His bloodshot eyes and shining cheekbones beginning to sink - would he now be surprised to remain the ideal of health? But now he is gone, beneath the bubbling surface, taken by the Sub and not alive.

I agreed to go with him, as did one of our wave whose name is not known: indeed, like two groaning cabins did we support his initial upsweep onto the ledge. This man and I dared not look up at Reeve's naked form as our bodies' machinery audibly labored, and the reasons were coexistent and manifold.

We would not follow Reeve, short of the most decisive, implausible success - this was assured, and retained throughout the preparatory motivation and threat from Reeve, whom we both idolized. We were, therefore, ashamed, and could not bear to see this man commit an act of valor, even if it were partially through our own agency. Most of all, I think, it was fear of the water.

The fluid in which we reside is called water, to which it is most similar. Beyond a centimeter, perhaps, it is dully opaque, the color of ivory. It froths easily, and these oily rills collect at the tank's edges, as brackishness might in a cove or brook - and enters one's orifices, which is to be avoided. As to the water's effects on flesh, it is first an irritant. The perverse process of scratching, satiating it through it may be in one's first cycles, is truncated by the fluid's other property - to desiccate the flesh (which prunes and gathers, softens, superannuates, blunts the senses, and so on). It conforms the individual to the tank, one could say.

And though Reeve had not been in long, it was this effect which my most destructive of personalities could no longer ignore, and I looked up. Reeve was quivering, and a low moan shook through his gut. I saw only the side of his knee before I looked back downward: it resembled a bundle of rags.

Now he was howling, and I also felt fragments of grout splash all around me. I instinctively backed away from the wall. The other man was nowhere to be seen. When Reeve fell, though he struck nothing, he was not even fit for the tank - luckily, I saw no more, as he was surrounded by those who once feared him.

My lucidly demonstrated hope then regressed within me - I was a resident of the tank and, besides myself, none were left to be distinguished, save within the oligarchy which I now served. I suppose I should now describe the green-and-white place which is our only home and hearth.

I am now a resident of the tank, which currently holds 42. It once held as many as 120, and as few as 7, to my knowledge. We will never leave the tank, my residents and I. We have nothing in common but Lethe and a disgusting need to continue our existence, which is within the

tank. The future and past may be flung both forward and back through the steam a few meters, to enter the common fluid and be lost, forgotten, soaked, absorbed. I mean to say they have nothing to do with us. Two precious memories I remember, as titles alone - the entry, and the heightened perspective of the tank's purpose (for any perspective above our eye level might be great, were it not optical or thermographic). Both are currently drained from the ledge of my history - I marked them first and placed them last, then conceding to mark what you now read, my ridiculously unlikely reader.

Let me present you a complete vision of the tank, wholly artificial in its completeness, as residents are permitted as to its engineering only flashes of sight - mine is presumptive. But I estimate nonetheless these properties. The tank is a tiled room 22 meters wide and some 30 meters long. It is not square, and these proportions distort inward - sometimes the width is nearly too slender to yield passage. Unseen jets in the ceiling, neither of which I have ever seen, continually release gouts of steam into the air, which render a thick fog with a few meters' visibility. This keeps the tank uncomfortably hot, and dampens the body with mist and sweat, and makes one take in each breath as if he expects the next will give him no nourishment.

The floor of the tank is tiled, but not ventilated, so that all manner of debris remains there and on the surface. The depth of the water is, at highest sound, about 1,8 meters. A depth of 1,8 is enviable - men have been both patient and shameless to stake a position at that depth. But the tank floor is uneven, and reaches deeper, which would prompt a poorly placed man to begin the process of removing a tile from the wall. Frustrating - debilitating, in fact, and largely avoided. For though having the tile underfoot may grant another 2 centimeters or so of clearance from the water, the process of removing one is quickly associated with the meditation of murdering another - most naturally the witness of that instant. The resident is a liar when he claims he does not fear any figure, approaching through the curtain of steam, to be holding a tile as high as his withered arms can protract, at which simple release would cause unthinkable, coarse pressure on one's head or chest. Whose eyes do not color a raised, shining brick of white in every movement of the shifting jets? Their hearts attest it, and I mean no poetry - the organs stutter and falter when I approach, for this much is revealed in the monitor of the countenance.

The water, as I have said, is of a depth that prompts all but the tallest men who stand in it to tilt their heads upwards, minimizing fluid contact to the face. Swimming or other movement is possible but unpleasant - the heat quickens, waste gathers in the folds of the skin, the face may be, again, splashed. I can only imagine the god's eye of a Karelian observing us in our plight - decrepit faces in a translucent frieze of white, detailed with a mosaic of swollen, piecemeal flesh.

As to the Karelians, our jailors and most malfeasant enemies, let me give you the bourgeois history. Who are we, the residents of the tank? Valiant soldiers, captured by a hyperbolically cruel enemy, and held thus pending the agency of our government. Who has captured us? The Karelians, who exist as a toneless vocable, suitable for spitting or cursing. All knowledge of their character, including that they are of the northernmost province of a country comprised of malefactors, is feigned. Why are we finding ourselves in the tank? The Karelians feel

towards our hypothetical Republic a rancor ceaseless and compounded as a winter storm, and has committed a select group of scientists, set apart from their detached, loathsome method, to find the precise atmosphere to execute the full order of nemesis harbored for an entire nation unto a small, defenseless group of heroes. Tragic, is it not? There is the easiest attraction to good and evil in such a narrative. All know it to be mostly false, as a myth or joke may be, and yet that particular history has banished residents to their private paranoia, and buried tiles into the overripe flesh of hundreds of innocents, and created a fear that pales the legacy of Karelia, the supreme torture state.

I have just laughed audibly - and God bless you, would you be surprised at the sound? - shuffling, enflamed by rim against flap, coughing appended. Once irony was the prime humor of the tank - now it has blended completely into the script of conversation, and contaminated it, for there is no volition of concern for whether the truth is told, regardless if the wisest of us know it, which, probably, we do not. Perhaps Lontano did - his rueful chuckle accented apparently directionless stories, often to my enlightenment. But who else is wise in the tank? The experienced jaded and false, the "dreamers" arrogant, the elderly deceitful and self-serving.

And do not fret - I will not trouble your soul, and reach into it where you yourself cannot, with our conversation in its raw form. There is no advancement possible in the subjects we address. Speech, concept is clipped - indeed, the phrase most overheard is, "I tire of it - " Only in the minds of certain of us does novelty flower, monstrous and weed-like. And those who are capable of long logic can be hunted like witches, and are eventually fodder for the Sub.

Besides, what reason is there to talk? Well, are you newly disposed to the tank? Is your skin ruddy from dry, cool air? Then many residents will crowd about you, insistent but never daring the unfavorable contrast of physical contact, asking you news of the world outside the tank, often subtly - by means of your own identity. Were you a fighting man? What will you miss most? What are the qualities of your person, apart from the obvious? All attempting to strike a psychological chord, for their false enthusiasm masks an understanding - none recollect, all are as blank slates. No one remembers who they were, and the cause, or combination thereof, is not clear.

We are quick to blame water and past treatment, each other, even - what does the truth matter in these circumstances? I am almost sure every man of the tank possesses memory. I freely assert that I do. Snatches of sound and movement - quick movement! - though bereft of all color but the green and white of the tank, clumsy attempts at a more vivid palette quickly abandoned. I remember walking around a classroom with other children, leaping on the table because the teacher would not arrive until much later. Laughing with friends by a fire beside a river (I strain to keep my vision to only the illuminated soil, and dancing, dappled branches). A young girl standing before a temple, with measureless light pouring out from her - so, you see, images that could not be borne of a life in the tank. It is more remarkable what we forget, which are names. Important words are, in memory, viewed through a cloud of methane, blurred to a thorough obscurity. Likewise, remembrances bear sharp, clean cuts in their patchiness, after which

there is blank space. So we are soldiers, but none recall a regiment or sergeant, or as much as a nation beneath which flag we were eager to spill blood, remote or personal. And we are human beings, though none recall a town or county of birth, or residence, a family, or so much a parent's name. It is recalled occasionally - we once had lives...

I have digressed. When the initial inquisition has passed, your hand is held no longer - you must find a spot in which to reside, and you are given a name, to which suspicions may be tallied, by the oligarchy that now surrounds you with a totalitarianism of uneasiness and exacting looks. Only the names of the dead may be reissued: Jones, Taylor, Hawkings, Van Clair, etc.

Then you may receive sustenance. Twice a cycle, our food is generated by some mechanism above, and stale biscuits of some sort fall into the center. The quantity changes, but it is never quite enough. If not caught, the bread will soften in the water surely enough. Grind your gums more seriously than cereal may, or ingest a sort of pulpy paper that makes nausea - the choice is yours. And though there is moisture everywhere, one's mouth is always dry, because there is no drink. Water is taken through the pores in its own agency. Those who ingest it, however, will soon find an audience.

There is no appreciable sleep. One gets tired, and begins to submit to the green-white folds of Morpheus, and then there is an abrupt start - your face burns, and your lungs tinged with fluid you have inhaled. Leaning against the wall grants nothing less - the feet, dulled to clubs from lack of circulation, slip on bits of viscera and waste that collect on the floor's edge, and the spine slides knobbly against the slick wall, easing your descent. The elderly claim that there was a habit in the tank past - one man would hold up another long enough for him to sleep, eyes a-flutter - none care to hear it.

Our blessings are, though frequently cited, easily countermanded - which will be left as exercise. We are not plagued by animal or pest - neither exist in the tank. The water relieves of the pain of memory that precludes it, and occupies our leisure, which might otherwise be idle. The opacity spares us the spectacle, and burden, of our own bodies. But not of the dead.

Corpses, prodded to the southwest, turn in ripples of water and decay for a long period. Their stench is somewhat subsumed by the chemical noxiousness of the jets. Eventually, the bones and spare flesh are taken by the Sub, a slow-moving sort of mechanical arm which expressly emerges there. Neonates for whom an especially cruel amount of disdain is reserved are recommended under some benefit to approach the Sub, an act that usually causes death.

Such actions I associate with the oligarchy, a presence as real, incorporate, as any of us individually. Comprised of those who are set apart in their tireless attempts to be "normal" - miserable and cunning - it is they that speak, often without being interrupted. Their rank is often classed in the droop of their cheeks.

For in wrinkles and flaccidity, one's experience can be surmised. Some have said, "Only in our eyes do we escape age and status," but the eyes have capillaries which blush more as you breathe the soup of the tank.

And, metaphorically, there is no truth in that aphorism - it is true that the tank has a committee minted solely to put others outside its security, and we who have ever glimpsed our own puffy appendages or drooping chests know that we are born into the tank uniformly old, and thus already absent in certain virtues.

After Reeve, I further and further taxed the patience of the men who silently rule, led for the most part by a man named Van Clair, with my austerity and, when cornered, directness. My association with Lontano was a sort of final straw. Our deaths were whispered in the mist, and I woke with a start from dreams of that brilliant headsman of stone, and its faceless deliverer.

I am sorry, Lontano. I would not do the thing now, nor would I have done it before. Perhaps it would have pleased you to know that I have no friend, not even a coefficient of you. I speak to no one. I live the solitude of the tank, and write this ineffectual and certainly unread history.

* * *

(Many slept. For the first time I could remember, I felt cool. Surmising the cause, it occurred to me to look up. Through the layered cirrus of steam, I eventually glimpsed a flash of silver, and the ceiling that framed it. Upon which I ravidly wrote the following -)

Waking up, and then some sort of klaxon. I am on a carpeted floor, looking for someone to follow. I am in the arid, multifarious land that we know only from dreams. My feet are cold and sheathed in tight nylon boots. In the dark, a mirror mounted onto a set of cots. Tall and strong!

The entrance is almost as brightly lit as the tank. The water (so casually benign then) rushing down the tiled slope, foaming in white, sanitized jets at its corners where the water leapt up. That was the next thing I saw, and just as the man before me was fed into the flume of water, a moment later, so was I. I reeled as my body was swept, splayed and awkward, down the flume. Was I taken in battle? How did I lose my position? I did not even remember an assault, the vicious cuts of memory it would sear into me.

And up ahead, there are men! Their uniforms are the color of chrome and waterproof, covering them entirely in folds and pouches. Their hands are empty, they themselves not surprised or alert in our presence - ah, one beckons me with a sweeping wave of his hand. What is there to suspect in his somatic language, his ease of duty? He is in all aspects guiding me, using a professional demeanor to augment whatever purpose his division or order has willingly bound him to. Is he of the Republic? Our allies? There is an escutcheon beside each shoulder. I approach him. "This way," he says, and though the word is our tongue, the sound is alien, soft but stubbornly audible. Sudden insight about it: there are minute fissures and omissions in its timbre, as if each word were built out of the remnants of countless others, overheard from all manner of people. His motions are gleefully purposeful, thereof

relaxed. I have barely to look at him to comply with his/our outlook on what is to come. One last glance -

I remember! There is a cleft between the ring and little finger that should be, and yet it was not in the figures that ushered me through the waterway. A defect in men, who are accustomed to articulation there, but natural to these gloved hands. The scent of chlorine, a thin tube leading from the base of the skull, the sound, beneath the sealed fabric of their work suits, of a pneumatic pressure - our captors spoke to each other through instruments. A foreign tongue, a familiar lack of tonality, but the cadences perhaps half as long...

My mind had, in the prolonged singular meditation of the tank which had ceased to fail, discovered the deceit behind our popular history, and our most hated enemy. The Karelians - not the arm of some socialist movement but, in fact, beings foreign to our globe's atmosphere - live on a diet of treated water, which is their ambience, meat, drink, oxygen, tonic - the conditions of the tank, thought to be nonpareil in human misery, were that which a typical "Karelian" would not object to in the course of his life or, in this studied locale, a small period of leisure. Steps had been taken to remedy our problems, which were seen at a relative level of severity. Otherwise, conduct in the tank was quotidian and accepted.

And should that horrify me? Change the degree of difference - the radicals, opposed to the techniques, of comfort - remove the rarefied parentage of our God that balanced the Earth on a chain of impossibilities - and humans outside the tank in times of peace would live out their lives in precisely the same way, regardless of how hospitable the manner to others. And how we had responded, in light of this, amongst each other -

Will I remember these revelations? Even as I write, they depart, chalk lines with passage of the sponge. It is as with the minute pleasures I have had in the tank, which might have been counted on one hand - they are tossed aside, any effort is too great...

(All begin equally nude, save for the mawashi we wear when we are cast in, which degrades quickly - from whence did my paper come?)

(There is a music of the tank. It is a muted clanging and clanking all about you, in distant but certain places. Lontano spoke of it often, but I remember nothing. My shoulders rear up when I am conscious of the sound, but I may be getting used to it.)

The realizations are here again. Did I say no thought was new? I squint my eyes, which sting and bulge in the billowing sheets of steam; ignore the dabs of ochre, surrounded by cascading, concentric circles, that are my fellow resident detainees; their moaning and wet coughing jags; I try to lift my mind above my diaphanous, decaying body and its entrenched cycle of propitiation to beings I shall never again see. Only then, in my gentle, weak return and recession to the tank, does lasting memory bloom. (Like clouds.) I remember that I have failed before.