
The
ECHO

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Classified Transcript: Recovered messages in a bottle written by prisoner B-89 on an isolated island (simulation sector HITORI) and prisoner K-72 at the Isolation Studies Lab (ISL), as part of a social experiment conducted in 2009. In 2011, ISL was disbanded because of legal issues with the memory loss program.

HOPE

The sea never answers.

At every rise of dawn, while the crickets are still chirping, I head to the assigned shoreline and admire them. My lovely children (colorful messages in glass bottles) are lined up like soldiers, their throats glinting with words I begged the ocean to carry away.

The island keeps me.

The sea refuses me.

I still don't exactly remember what my crime was. Whether I drove a knife into my sister or my mother–or whether it was even a knife, or a hatchet. Though I don't know where I would've found a hatchet. The sea has washed away many things–my name, my family–but it denies me the right to let go of my guilt.

This is the first message I have tossed into the sea. Finally brave enough to let the water, looking like spilled cyan paint, swallow what my mind no longer battles with.

I will write again. Again. Again.

Until I find what will make my boat float.

With hope,

Prisoner B-89

OBSERVATION

Your definition of hope amuses me–as though you believe in it. Optimism is uncommon on Day 345 of isolation, but I am no psychological expert. Most subjects at this stage replace hope with food, water, or questionable language.

I do not have a sea.

You have a sea to swallow your sins. I have bleach-white walls to keep mine.

I am surrounded by walls the color of spoiled milk and security cameras tracking my every step. It is hard to think back to when experiments were only for animals.

You write about forgetting your crime. That is unusual.

I do not forget.

They do not let me.

From observation,

Prisoner K-72

Written at 3:14 PM at ISL Cell 93

PLEA

My soldiers are dying faster than ever now. The sea is hungry. Something must sustain it. My nightmares are getting out of hand; they scare me… Even when the scientists brought me here, I was not scared.

It spoke of a hallway with the number 93. It is deeply unsettling. Cold. Gray. Like spoiled milk–if what I remember even happened at all.

Why would an island have a number? I am the only object here with a number. 89.

It has been too long here. I cannot remember what my life was before, and what I do terrifies me. The shoreline feels as if it is shrinking and suffocating me.

Maybe hope is just another experiment they forgot to log.

With plea,

Prisoner B-89

WARNING

Dreams are a fancy word for delusions that adults use to satisfy children. For us, lights out at 22:00. Not for sleep. They say dreams conflict with accuracy.

You are a murderer, a criminal. Isolation is what suits us best. Do not try to remember. Some memories are better left picking up dust in the corner. I know because I am one too.

My sister is surrounded by dirt with a headstone to prove it. I caused her death, and she'll cause mine. Plot 14-B–that's how the system files her.

Guilt is a side dish to memories, and from one subject to another, do not eat it.

Your memory at this stage impresses me. It exceeds the average 98% that lose sense of reality by day 200. Perhaps ISL will keep you alive longer. Do not mistake it for a gift. The sweet relief of death will simply be stalled, and you will go more insane by the clock.

Dreams are a luxury for those who plan on surviving.

From warning,

Prisoner K-72

Written at 4:28 PM at ISL Cell 93

IDENTITY

I don't know who I am anymore. I have been getting more visions and memories–room 93, ISL (whatever it stands for), and someone called K-72. It is almost me. I am it.

Dreams have a funny way of seeming real.

The sweet relief of death would be welcome any time now. I'm waiting.

I shouldn't trust my dreams, but today I saw the ocean flicker. Like a hologram. I must be going crazy. Insane.

There is hope.

There are dreams. I sound like a child on Christmas morning who just found out they're on the naughty list. I've never cared much for presents, though.

With identity,

Prisoner B-89

EMOTION

Today, the isolated prisoner I have been writing to passed away. It would have happened sooner or later, but my gut twisted.

The island was a simulation, but the prisoner insisted that there was an ocean.

The sea was medicated after all–part of a memory experiment. It would be nice to live long enough to see the look on ISL's faces when someone discovered their crimes. Oh well. Death cannot be evaded.

Protocol demanded that I be present to confirm the body. I found that particularly suspicious–the ISL is a detached, emotionless organization. They care neither for my happiness nor that prisoner's life.

They gave me a bottle of water to drink under the sun's burning glare, and although I probably should not have, I drank it as thirst got the best of me.

Was it my sister or my mother that I had killed?

With emotion,

Prisoner K-72

Written at 7:12 PM, at the island of HITORI

MEMORY

I had another dream today. I sense death nearing and the only thing I remember is:

You are assigned.

You are observed.

You are B-89 now.

There is no K-72.

FINAL REPORT// FILE: T-L9// STATUS: TERMINATED

Subject: Akir Johnson

Age: 24

Aliases: B-89, K-72

Crime: Subject killed his sister under ISL influence. He was later taken to the lab as a viable candidate for Experiment Isolde (controlled memory fracture trials).

Notes: Subject was transferred from ISL Cell 93 to simulation sector HITORI for Phase IV of the Experiment Isolde. The subject maintained a belief in a “sea” despite no water sources being present in the sector.

Death: Subject expired soon after the last message he wrote, on April 12th, 2009, due to dehydration. Time of death: 19:21.

Important: On April 13th, 2009, a message in a bottle was found inside cell 93, and scanners detected traces of seawater. No water was authorized in Cell 93.

It held evidence of ISL’s illegal memory washing and caused ISL’s court case in 2011.

It is unknown who collected the evidence and left the bottle.

There was only one note:

The sea never answers.

There was no sea.

There never was.

But something answered.





I've been trying to find the moment I became a bad person for a few hours now.

It could have been any instant from the day I was born, so I've had to look carefully. But it must have been before today, before the hospital. I didn't mean for this to happen—I was good once, or at least not bad. Somewhere along the way I just got stuck, I suppose.

A good person wouldn't have let her go so far. When we were little, my sister and I made up this game with an old plastic storage bin. She would climb inside, lay on her back, and drag on the lid, filling the dim space with exhales and anticipation. Then, I would climb on the top and press the cover down as she screamed and kicked, either until our mom came in to yell at us or until she finally pushed hard enough to leave the darkness. I'll never forget the face she would make when she escaped: the panting tiger. I think it was her favorite part, the defiance.

I remember thinking, a couple weeks ago, I hadn't seen that face in a long time. Something was gnawing at her. We hadn't been talking much, not unless she had a cigarette to pull on between the silences. If you watch any of these talks closely, you might see the moment I became bad. Each meeting dotted with the free passage of nevermind, nevermind, nevermind.

A good person wouldn't have waited. The air was muggy as I walked home.

Wait one moment, I'm sorry. I have to tell you some

thing, and it's about me this time: I've been living behind an invisible wall. No one else can feel it except for me, but I promise it's there. It's always there. It stops me from doing things. Things like clubs and sports. Things like friends. It's why I could go straight home from school. If I had to describe it, it feels like that day, like pressure in the atmosphere.

There was no breeze to stir my hair.

After school I tended to follow a routine. Take your shoes off, eat your leftovers, do your work. It was something she sometimes teased me about, when we had those talks on dust-covered stoops—that I didn't know how to live, not like she did. That I cared too much. Here's another thing I've relayed over and over: there was nothing different about that day. The house was empty, and every action was swathed by a familiar quiet, the kind that makes me want to tip-toe. But look carefully right here. A moment that may have been the beginning of my badness. Walking back to my room, I saw her flip phone, split on its hinge, snapped. It was unusual and I knew that. But something inside of me bit its tongue to prevent that sense of wrongness from reaching my brain. The house was so still. I reached down silently, and slid the halves into my pocket. Would a good person do that?



The steam was what did it. What made me stop pretending. Sometimes on especially bad days, she would crank her shower knob as high as it could go, just to watch the way the room filled with dancing, trapped air. That day, it must have been going for a long time. That day, the carpet was wet—little condensed beads clinging to the shag. Moisture curled up the wood of the door and slipped back down like tears. I crouched to watch them disappear into the bright gap between the ground and the door. Mom will be upset if the wood warps, squeaked through the biting on my brainstem. She'll yell at your sister again. Every other week they would decide to argue over something small, as

to crawl to dinner at an early hour because that was how my mom liked it. Something is wrong. The carpet might mold, and then they would have to tear it out and replace it. Often when I remember my sister, the image conjured is one of her on that floor. She used to curl up in the small space between her nightstand and the wall and talk on the phone for hours, even though I knew it hurt her back sitting there. I remember when her boyfriend asked her out on that phone—she told him yes, yes of course, it didn't meet her eyes. Something is wrong. If the water bill gets too high we'll never hear the end of it. I have heard too many times of her ability to drink anything with a straight face, to stunt and dare at parties all night. Once at a classmate's pool, she slipped and snapped two fingers, getting grounded for a month. I spent it watching her from a distance, wondering if she liked the stripes she wore. If she could escape them. I wished I had asked her if she ever really didn't care and something is wrong. I'm not sure how long I stood at the door before reaching for the handle.

In the dissipating fog, I waited for one final defiance, but it never came.

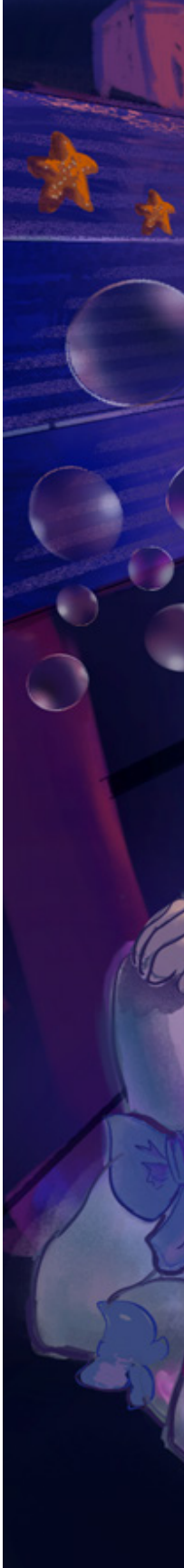
Everything smelled like flowers outside the hospital. There were these big trees that danced falling petals wherever they wanted. I had just made it to today in my memories, tracing the divots in the invisible wall as my guide.

Suddenly everything feels very real. There are birds chirping in the eaves and gnats buzzing everywhere. There's the sound of impatient families bickering and wheels turning under gurneys from inside the gleaming white building. I scratch at my palms and realize how long my nails have gotten. I listen to the sound of my lungs beneath my ribs.

I'm counting my 'should's. I should have knocked down that wall years ago. Or maybe I should never have had it at all. If it wasn't there, I could have sat by my sister and looked her in the eye and made her explain what was wrong, really wrong, and never have accepted a never-mind ever again. I would have tackled her and hugged her and told her I loved her and that she didn't have to care what all those people thought, and did she remember the tiger and our laughter and how we used to play together?

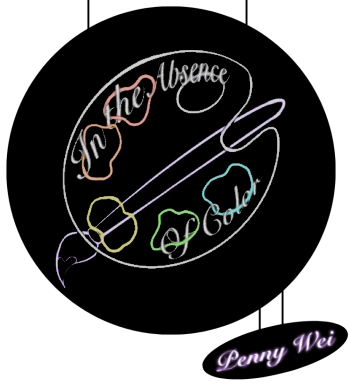
It takes my blotchy reflection on a polished beam for me to realize how my tears are falling around the edges of a smile. You just care too much. I start giggling and find I can't stop. I laugh and laugh until the hospital security guard starts eyeing me, which just makes me laugh harder. I think it's directed at myself. How even now I'm stuck, or maybe it's at the memory of our laughter, how happy we were. I think you're right, you know. When I stop for a moment, the wind blows through and I breathe light and easy as the breeze.





"*Morning Sunrise*" by Madeline Sanidas





Red: 12

The disease I was infected with at three took me away from the colors of a rainbow. A palm draped over my visions, or, more specifically, the encephalitis infections led to inflammation of the brain, hence a permanent loss of color perception. Little did I mind, for I do not and could not reminisce myself living amongst colors anyway. You tell me I live merely in shades of gray, in monochromacy, on a land of aridity,



where photosynthesis will not occur on a plantation and where laughter will not come out of a person's rolling tongue. Mama, I then will assure you, just as I have been doing all of my life every few months when your worries and empathy pour on me like a river bursting its banks. I'm fine without colors, it's not like I'll become an artist like you.

You teach me colors as if teaching me a native tongue the family owns, I , being the only hope for its descent; I learn the colors as if learning a language I'll never use.

Red, you would say, pointing at the flames crackling on the fireplace in the living room, fire is red. Red is passion, is energy, is love, is romance, is ambition, and is fierceness. Oh, Mama, you are such a poet. Did you know that one can never imagine something they've never seen? I only nod, and stare at how the shades of gray on her lipsticked-lips matched her ruby nails, matched her sanguine cheeks warm from her zealous speech (all descriptions of colors I've learnt to accumulate over the years), and I say: Mama, you must then be red.

Orange: 18

Orange is in the fall, when days bleed into one another, and when memories slip through crevices of the mind. Summer ended hastily in our town, and half a month before college the earth of Dover was piled with crunchy leaves of autumn.



You take me out on a walk after dinner amidst the canopy of maple trees, and you exclaim once again why I cannot hear the rolling heartbeat of late August. I retorted that I am not deaf.

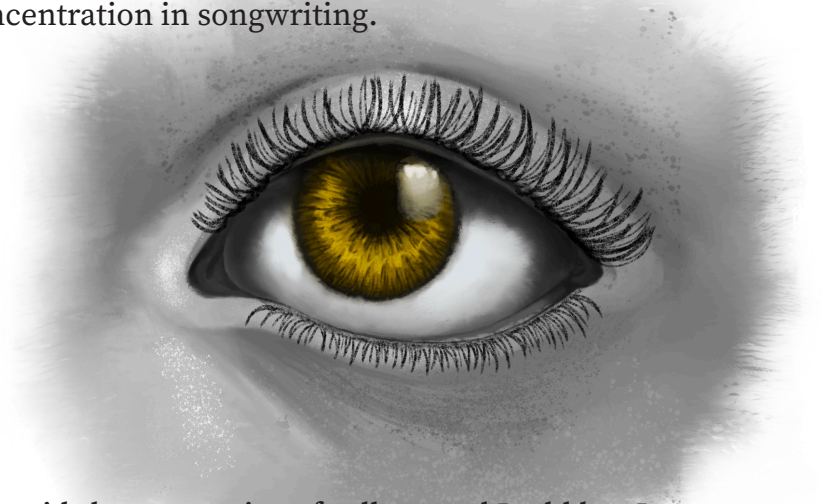
You describe more of the color to me, but I maintained my silence— I want to tell you that I can now see orange.

Orange is your wrinkled forehead as you fret my future, is your outstretched hand and rice-scented palms, is the setting sun of dawn as we stroll across the neighborhood, is your bending back and fingers too sour to hold a paint brush.

Orange is your ebbed sanguineness. Orange is the season of flux. But I only tell you that orange is in the fall, the summer before I went to college; the summer you start to decompose.

Yellow: 20

Lucie's embrace—one that accompanied candescence—came with the strumming of nylon strings on the Flamenco guitar, the candidness of her mandarin intonation as she conversed in English, and the saccharinity of Dunkin's lemonade refreshers she fed me with her burning lips. Two years into college, and two years away from Dover, I fell in love with the girl who sat next to me in history and who majored in music with a concentration in songwriting.



She said she was a wisp of yellow, and I told her I cannot see colors, so she blinded my eyes with her hands and whispered into my ears that at least I can hear them. Her citrus-scented breath and sunshine kisses constructed my yellow.

Somewhere in between the late night facetimes within tight strings of job interviews and coffee chats and homework assignments, I listen to your coughs and observe your sagging, gray face. Lucie, I yell at you when you condemn me for my romance, is the vibrance you had lost? But, somewhere, when Lucie and I stray the streets like lost puppies after getting drunk, I still search for your figure under streetlights, as if your apparition sources any metallic warmth. Sometimes, when I have lost all pieces of sobriety, I hug every streetlamp I see.

Yellow, I then came to realize, is brightness that comes in different shades.

Green: 24

You decided to give New York a visit after I was settled, underwent a promotion, and bought a house in Riverdale. It was the first time you ever stepped out of Dover, the town that seemed to trap you for life. You were just in time for Lucie's choral performance showcase, and before we stepped into the auditorium we stood in March air, where you commented that New York had less green than Dover. Your voice wobbled so thin I could not tell where your words began and where they ended. You were a tree hollowed, ring after ring, until you were but a brittle frame with creaking joints and trembling roots. Green is not for me now—- you pull the collar of my leather jacket straight—- it is for you, little sprout.



But green is in you, too. It is nurtured by the veins and flesh you think have decayed. You once told me that green is the promise of a new life and new future, but green is burgeoning from you too; you are the breath of earth subsequent to winter, you are the seeds that stem from dark soil. Mama, you are never decaying, you are growing, and God has given you rebirth.

Somewhere between Lucie's voice as she melodies her songs, you joke that I have escaped one artist to marry another. Colorblind as the son of a painter, I will soon be tuneless as the husband of a singer. I reply that even if I lose both senses, I will still feel with my touch and ponder with my mind. You laugh at how childish my poetic-ness is.

Blue: 30

Three years after your passing, on a Saturday evening when the blue hour stretched its long, quiet fingers over Lake Ontario, Lucie decided to tell me of blue in the dimming light. Blue — she takes a sip of water— is the color of silence. Its, the stillness between two notes, rest.

But, when I hear her speak of blue, I think of you.

I think of nights in Dover where everyone else has gone to sleep and your solemn figure remains by the dinner table, bathed in the paleness of the moon. Blue is the space between her words, the distance in her sighs, and the moments of peace when the world was asleep and we were together.



Blue was, instead with me all along. I carry the color, just as I carry red in your blushing cheeks and orange in the slips of seasons and yellow in the warmth of streetlamps and green in the veins of life. I am colorblind as the son of an artist, but Mama, you have given me color, and I have never been barren. I have always seen what I have never seen, and it is precisely colors that make up my life.

Mama, I have continued your legacy:

I am an artist myself.



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ORIGIN stories



Remy Licari is a short-story writer from San Diego, CA. She is a senior at Canyon Crest Academy, where she is part of the Creative Writers' Club.

Penny Wei is from Shanghai and Massachusetts. She can be seen in West Trestle Review, Inlandia Journal and The Central Dissent: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality. She is the author of Her Other Fragile Inheritances, Animism, and other books.



Ishana Kunapureddy is a writer from Fort mill south Carolina whose work often explores themes like identity and perception. She hopes her writing helps her readers understand fresh perspectives.

Madeline Sanidas is a 16 year old 2D artist from Tampa Florida that focuses on character design and backgrounds. She hopes to one day become a concept artist for an animation studio.