

Experiment

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There was to be a capsule; designed in complete government secrecy; planted in shallow water off a coast where small submersibles could check periodically on the progress of the colony it contained. The food and waste systems completely closed; a nuclear engine would power machines that would decompose carbon dioxide into glucose, which would be mixed with artificial nutrients into the next day's rations. Completely self-sufficient: built to last indefinitely. No corners cut; windows made of bulletproof acrylic, extra-thick. The capsule contained hallways and palisades, parks, recreation. It was to be truly a small city, built completely underwater for the purpose of discovering the secret to modern life.

There were some in the lower echelons of management who possessed ethical concerns about putting 91 children ranging from 3 to 6 in the capsule, but the rewards of truth were too profound to be appreciated by the public, which wasn't going to be informed anyway. We were going to simulate the progression of human life! The oldest child had been told how to collect food from the numerous dispensers stationed around the capsule's interior. It was by choosing such young people, and giving them no education, that the researchers hoped to see language evolve and society become constructed. They would monitor the group through specially constructed surveillance points, the largest of which also hid the original access port; a narrow, duct-like metal gantry linking the capsule to a hatch on the surface, marked innocently as a buoy.

The years drove by, each bringing new problems to the surface world. The capsule remained isolated. The researchers faithfully tended their cameras, and found the children engaged in all that children do, from playing with toys and roaming the capsule, to drawing pictures of the ocean through the windows and gradual social interaction as the children reached their teens, finally forgetting their past origins; the next generation would be completely oblivious to life on the surface. The lack of language limited the colony. The original oldest, not fluent in English, had imparted only a few words to the youngest. Thus, the average person only knew a few words, but that would change as new generations forgot them. The language would have to completely devolve before it was rebuilt.

The researchers grew older, and even modern medicine could not prevent their passing. A few took their place, then fewer, as the project passed into classified obscurity. The project became lost to the government as a few scientists took the work on as an aside. The measurements, observations, and other notes of past researchers' work moved in boxes into attics, then into storage units, eventually forgotten. The hatch on the buoy became one of many buoys with one or two people really knowing what went on beneath.

The years passed by. The winter seas ground the buoy into the water, the summer seas brought relaxing drifts. Autumn brought tiny flakes of leaves from the shore. The year drew to a close. Ten, a hundred, thousands of times the cycle began and ended.

The outside world was a mystery. Never before had the colony wondered what was outside of the capsule's boundaries. Trapped for generations, they saw the capsule as their entire universe. Their small world was as large a world as they had ever seen; they could not imagine anything larger than the world they knew. Still, slowly, they began to wonder.

Their answer came when they discovered a small cache of artwork under the remnants of a fountain, made centuries ago by their ancestors. The crude colored and decayed wax drawings they found clearly showed a blue mass that ebbed around the colony's acrylic windows. Their ancestors' faces were scrutinizing strange creatures that floated just beyond these. These creatures came in many colors--colorful objects moving in the ocean. A few drawings showed puffy white things in a lighter blue sea. Blocks were stacked up, and caricatures of their ancestors walked inside them and outside, on a sort of green floor. They called this place the sky-world. The windows now were filled with white, and were cold to the touch. They sagged inwards, and in some places the frame itself had buckled slightly, letting in a frozen powder they had no name for.

They decided to find the sky-world, for surely it must be heaven. They concluded that it must be beyond the capsule walls, for they knew the inside well enough, but no one had ever been outside. They scrutinized every corner of the capsule for an escape. The capsule's service hatch had been carefully hidden by its original makers, so as to leave the colony with no means of escape; if there appeared to be no exit, then perhaps they would not try to find one or leave. This had been the case for many generations, but now, they finally found a

small door behind a mirror in a disused alcove, leading into a compartment filled with the observational equipment the researchers had used. These were alien artifacts, for the colony had never seen cameras and microphones. The service gantry above resembled a square duct, and was not designed for durability. The sides had crumpled significantly, though they had not ruptured. The top of the gantry had been crushed as well; the hatch to the outside world had fallen inward long since, leaving a white ceiling they concluded must be the way out. For weeks, the colony worked in teams, chiseling their way through the countless layers of frozen water separating them from the unknown. The last of the glistening ice finally crumbled to their blows, and they pushed the mass upward, slowly removing the last barrier to the sky-world.

At first they did not know for certain they had emerged. The air was black and still. It was absolutely silent. A thin coating of dust covered the ground, which they soon found to be ice as well. The dust was ruddy. Those who touched it felt burned a few minutes later, as if the dust itself carried some arcane poison.

As they, one by one, exited the hole and clambered up the icy steps, they remarked on their surroundings. The sky-world was immense. The clouds stretched from horizon to horizon, and a never ending dense black fog hung in the air, immobile. The very air itself seemed painful to breathe. They walked aimlessly, first trying to find a wall or a ceiling; some boundary to the sky-world, but could find none. The fog obscured everything, but as far as they could see, the ground was an icy plane covered with nothing but the burning dust—completely flat and featureless.

However, they soon became aware of a towering structure, not far away. The air had become blacker; nearly opaque. A pungent odor filled the air as amber snow fell, clumping together in enormous flakes. The structure loomed through the blackened mist, and the travelers walked toward it over the frozen sea.

The structure was enormous. On the side, they found a door, caked in burning dust. They used rocks they found nearby to chip away the rust, and forced the door open.

Inside the rusty door a frozen room was found, containing a raised metal plate, covered in more of the burning dust. When it was cleared, they peered closely and read the ancient plaque which said:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The symbols meant nothing; they were written in some strange and forever lost language, gone forever; an emblem of a long forgotten civilization. The words were written for another time--they were a message to other people; advice perhaps. These people knew they would never know what it meant, and they knew that it did not matter if they did. The travelers left the sky-world's monument as it was, and continued through the growing darkness amid the falling snow.