Happy? Sad?
Arthur Davis

“It’s nothing personal,” the VA worker says, loading the vid again. “Standard procedure. Everyone has to pass reintegation.”
Casper watches the flickering blue light appear in the space before his nose. “No,” he says. “I understand.”
A patient, tinny voice struggles out of the vid player. “Welcome to the Shared Earth Integration program.”
Out of the light materializes the flickering image of a human and an Alphie side by side. “Let’s start with a little quiz.”

When he gets home, she is gone. Her red-eye to Mars must have landed sometime in the early afternoon, just as he was stepping into the VA. It would be a short trip, she had told him. She’d have the defendant acquitted in a few days. As Casper sits down on the edge of bed, he finds the wrinkled sheets have preserved the shape of her. His fingers trace the folds, which have long since lost her warmth.
He should stand. Check the to-do list she taped on the fridge and run some errands.
He could make the bed, at least.
Instead, he examines the cloudlike shapes of mold across the ceiling, which is painted white like a winter sky. He wonders if a higher rent might be worth it for clearer weather. Hours later, a steady dripping in the bathroom lulls him to sleep.
Unconscious, he twists the sheets around his legs, and they cocoon him until they become a jail. Half-wrapped like a corpse, he dreams of too-small shuttles and the breath-hot press of bodies inside them, hands on his shoulders, hips, apologies, the unsteady whir of an engine as the spacecraft, overloaded, prepared to launch. Did the shuttles’ designers know how few would make the return trip home? Is that why there was so little room?
He wakes with salt on his lips and gets up to shower the taste away.
On his way to the bathroom, he passes through the space that is their kitchen, their parlor, their dining room, and their study. The fridge has a new decoration: an electronic whiteboard and a purple stylus hung from a string, pushed by a breeze from the window he forgot to close the night before. Anen must have gone to another rummage sale on her way home from court. The whiteboard has too many scratches to be new.
A dump truck whirs and clangs outside. The stylus cap taps lightly against the refrigerator as it swings, keeping time. Casper reaches out and catches the string, then lays the stylus on the small ledge formed by the top of the whiteboard. He turns, shakes his head, and steps through the curtain they put up to make up for their missing bathroom door.
He showers, quick, efficient, military. He steps out and towels off, but does not dress beyond his sleep pants and a binder. Bed is his only intended destination.
On the refrigerator, the whiteboard is flashing a message: ONE UNREAD. Its interface is archaic by today’s standards, but when Casper was young—before half the states went up in smoke and the war against the stars began—it was still the stuff of movies. He has to take the stylus and press the small blue rectangle on the screen to accept the message.
Anen’s birdlike handwriting appears on the screen. *What did you do today?* Somewhere, in a hotel room, with the red graveyard of the Martian landscape outside her window, she must have taken a matching stylus and written this in the air, signing it with two sweeps of her wrist: the Alpheratzien pictograph for love. He tries to imagine her expression.
What did he do today?
He lets go of the stylus; it falls and strikes the fridge door. He has nothing to write. Nothing to say. Not for today, not yet, and he will have nothing for tomorrow. Casper curls and uncurls his fingers.
Cars caught in morning traffic sound their klaxon horns. Their cacophony turns his head for him, and he remembers the window is still open. Something hot and sour rises in his throat: the world outside is creeping in, through sound, through light, through a breeze just like the day before. It is creeping in and peeping in on his miserable, quiet life, and in a sudden fit of energy he rounds on his heel, stalks across the all-purpose room, grabs the window’s frame, and slams it down.
The traffic goes quiet.
His fingers tingle. Taking a breath, Casper nods to himself. He straightens up, adjusts his binder, and nods again.
With the window closed, his attention returns to the room around him. For the first time since Anen left, he registers that there are shoes on the couch, and a jacket on the table, and papers blown by the wind to the floor by his toes. Casper picks them up. He taps them into a neat pile. Then, crossing the room to the fridge, he tucks the paper under one arm and writes on the whiteboard: *I cleaned.* Then he sets about making it true.

He decides to tell the VA worker about it the next day, although he has no appointment, because he only really has Anen to talk to, and she is gone. They make him wait, for a long time, for an open slot in a shabby lobby full of other vets just as dazed as he is, only some of whom he recognizes. One of them, with rot scars climbing her throat, makes eye contact, then slides her gaze down to his left hand. “Who were you with?” Her voice is raspy, eaten-through. Casper covers his left hand, hiding the rot scars and his missing finger from sight. “The Twenty-Third.”

A number of people across the room look at him now. They read the reports; they saw the news. He shifts, squeezing his left hand. On his first day back, and on many days since, the VA agent sat him down in front of that flickering vid of an Alpheratzien. *Happy,* the alien said, and tipped its head, blinking all its eyes. *Sad.* Its shoulders raised, and its lower eyes fell. *Happy. Sad. Angry,* it said. At the time, he had wondered what it felt like to be stared at so closely by Earthers as they struggled to distinguish body language from normal movement, squinting and studying just to pick basic emotions out of what, to them, was an impenetrable, alien *other.* With the other veterans’ sympathetic eyes on him, he knows that feeling now.

He stands up too quickly when they call his name. Inside the office, the VA worker looks at him with red-rimmed eyes. Casper stops in the doorway. “What is it today?” they ask.

Casper opens his mouth and closes it again. He cannot remember what he came to say.

He goes home. There, the walls press in around him as he remembers her pillow has gone unused for a second night. Casper pushes his nose into the pillowcase and hopes to find her in its smell. There is nothing. He searches the bathroom mirror for smears of lipstick or toothpaste left by careless hands, and there is nothing. He pauses by the space her ever-packed suitcase occupies by the door when she is here and touches the wall above it with a shaking hand. The rest of the world seems to slow and hold its breath. *A few days,* she had said. The apartment is a still life without her, and he is as much an object as the rest.

There is no message on the whiteboard today. He sleeps badly. Whatever dreams he dreams that night, they startle him awake at two in the morning, when all the shadows have the faces of people he knew and buried years ago. Heart racing in his chest, Casper nearly falls out of bed, struggling into his socks and his clothes and his shoes and out the door, down the stairs, and across the street to a disreputable bar. It looks like the sort of place for raucous raw-knuckled life—the sort of place where not even the grinning skulls of phantoms would dare to follow. The alcohol won’t hurt him either.

The mist becomes a rain before Casper has walked even half a block from home. His steps carry him past the bar he meant to go to, and as he walks, a blue spring chill sinks into his bones. The numbness soothes some ache that has settled under his skin. Someone offers him their umbrella. He shakes his head. With rain on his lashes and in his eyes, the city looks like it did sixty years ago. That was the horror of star travel. This generation no longer knew how traveling through hyperspace used to feel like your bones were turning to gel and your blood to glue, how your face felt stretched, twisted, ghastly, how you smelled vomit and rot and then: nothing. It was over. It took only minutes to jump between different ends of the night skies.

Then came the adjustments. Every clock had to be corrected, because time passed differently while you traveled through the thin nothingness of subspace. All the soldiers had made it into a ritual, that turning-forward of the days, skipping over all the Earth years they had missed. Still, reports were sometimes filed dated with the year someone had left the Earth—a year that was now memory and dust. Once, he spent thirty seconds of his life on a jump to an ExTerrestrial station. On Earth, they had lost almost eleven years.

Their thick protective gear helped bind the pain of it inside. They were soldiers, not children; they had been sent to war. They had been sent to do a job. A power from the stars had razed the eastern United States and they, Earth’s chosen, would bring it and its alien masterminds to heel.
Seven subspace jumps from Earth, they reached their goal. Once there, however, they learned there could be no war. There was only an old alien defense system above a now-uninhabited world, built long ago to guard that planet’s skies, that had been triggered when the first Earth probes flew by for recon in this sector. It was this defense system, not a hostile power, that brought them here. As for the planet’s vanished people, they did not yet know where they had gone.

Certain pilots were tasked with drawing fire from the defense system while others sneaked through the dogfight and landed on that world. These explorers were to evaluate the planet’s history. Its resources. Anything to salvage this otherwise wasted venture. The Twenty-Third Regiment stepped from a shuttle into the ruins of a once-great city and shaded their eyes against the dawn, looking upwards as pilots they knew became meteors, careening from the sky. Casper’s regiment said prayers. If asked, they would have also wanted to die like stars, but it was the body rot—a creeping illness from that world—that would eat most of them alive.

Casper stops beside a tech store where tall, curving screens offer Technicolor glimpses into the day’s broadcasts and news. There is life budding and molding all the world over, and price tags cut in jagged diamonds and outlined in silver pen promise Casper a chance at that life for four annual payments, not counting VAT.

His eyes drift to the screens he cannot afford and the slivers of existence they show. On one set, two people let their mouths meet with no small amount of hesitation and blushing. On another, a show host gushes over the first Alpheratzien-authored book. Pop-up text appears as the camera zooms in: THE FIRST OF ITS KIND. Casper stares. He thinks of the empty cities he had walked in on another world, cities the Alphies had abandoned for fear of the rot that had consumed his soldiers, one by one, as long as they breathed the planet’s air. He wonders how long it takes to write a novel; Earth has been cohabited for twenty years.

One monitor toward the bottom of the store display has a headline in marquee text along the screen. The ExTerrestrial settlement project is expanding. A generation had turned its mind to science, having lost parents to the stars and the slippage of time. Travel is now faster than ever before. It has become almost humane.

Casper drops his eyes and studies both his hands. He almost puts his right fist through the storefront glass. He almost puts his left fist through his own reflection.

What did you do today?
He closes his eyes. He steps away.

He is in the park on a bench, then, and he does not recall how he got there. The urge to hurt something is still receding. The rain has soaked his thin clothes through, forming a film on the skin beneath. An Alpheratzien races through the far end of the public park, a newspaper held above their head. Their muscular legs carry them with surprising speed: they run, feet flashing forward like spokes of a wheel. Soon they are out of sight once more. The city is still, except the rain.

Casper takes a deep breath. “What did I do today?” He tries to formulate a reply.
She has not asked, but he will tell her. He will tell her he had nightmares, and woke up, and walked here, to the park, where he met her. She bought him lunch from a hot dog stand.
“As my client,” she had said, “it’s my treat for you.”

Casper was not really her client. She was doing pro bono work for the VA, and a caseworker had given her a file with his name. There was a property dispute he had to settle: the matter of his mother’s will. When he goes home, he will say that he remembers that first meeting so clearly, so well. They found themselves beneath a tree Casper once fell out of, and Anen ate half his fries.

He remembers he asked her why she worked for free. To establish herself, she told him, waving a fry. To build a name, a reputation. She had a look about her when she said it: her upper eyes raised to the heavens, a broad hand on her left shoulder, fry pinched between two fingers. Her body spoke to her emotions, not her tone, and he, still a stranger to the notion of cohabited Earth, must have stared. But she was polite to him. Kind, even. When they parted ways, he smiled. It was the first time he felt like he could breathe since he had come home.

The storm lessens from a downpour to slow sheets of rain, draped like a veil over the city streets. Casper stands. He lets the new rhythm of the rain beat its tempo into his bones, and then, with no great speed, he begins his journey home.

His shoes squelch with every step. By the time three blocks have passed, Casper finds he’s barefoot, carrying his shoes. Rainwater tickles his soles and their scars. Someone on the other side of the street
walks by. They also have their sneakers off and tucked under one arm. The landlord, Mr. Dottery, is watering the plants in the apartment building lobby. Whatever he gives them, they only ever look sicker for it the next day, but Casper does not say this aloud. He thinks the old man might evict him if he did.

“You are a mess,” Mr. Dottery says, eying Casper's dripping clothes.

“Yes,” Casper says.

The old man wrinkles his nose and squints his eyes, clutching his watering can, but Casper is already brushing past him, clambering up the stairs. He goes straight to his apartment and straight to the whiteboard and fills the board with his shaky chicken scratch writing. He writes everything that will fit. He writes: I miss you.

He goes to bed.

The third day, he walks outside barefoot. The pavement warms beneath his feet. For a while, Casper stands with his head tipped back, searching the mirrored walls of high-rise buildings for slivers of other people’s lives: a lunch break taken by a window, sandwich balanced in hand, the city sprawled out before them; a secret smoke on a balcony; a window-washing machine. He stands until someone bumps into him, all skeleton and skin. Their shoulder leaves his collarbone aching, and for a while, the blossoming pain warms him: another person left this on him. When it fades, he goes back inside. The door swings shut between him and the sun-drenched streets.

He goes to his bathroom to search for the sleeping pills Anen does not think he needs. It seems easier than going back to the VA, sitting in the lobby, waiting while the others stare. There is an appointment on the calendar for him to retry the reintegration session, but tomorrow, not tonight. Tonight, he can indulge in an easier sort of peace.

When he finds the pillbox below a floorboard, he thumbs it open. Two capsules fall into his hand, sickly-colored, purple and blue like a day-old bruise on his pale cupped palm. He tips his hand and they shift position, brushing curves like strangers touching shoulders on a crowded city street. His collarbone aches at the memory.

She would clear her throat if she were here. Looking up, he sees an empty bed, but he can also imagine her on it: the long lines of her, the narrow feet that hang off the mattress’ end.

He swallows the pills without water. He lies down on her side of the bed and sleeps.

Twice, he finds himself pouring out pills again, peering groggily at the label to make sure he does not overdose. A dream of her lips against his waist keeps him tethered here; he does not want to go. He only wants time to slip by like it once did, when he flew through subspace toward a war, until she comes home. The pills go down easy. Each time, a fog swallows him once more.

At last, when he wakes, he feels Anen’s cool skin against his back. Her hand is splayed across his chest. She seems at first too cool to the touch to be anything but a breeze ghosting by, given shape by his mind on the edge of sleep, and by his wish to have her home. But—no. She is here, and pressed against him in a fond, familiar way.

“Hey,” he whispers, in case she’s sleeping. “What day is it? Aren’t you home early?” She does not speak. He can feel her pulse where her arm meets his side. She smells sterile, like Mars air; she smells like perfume applied to hide her sweat, a scent in its own right, like salt water deep enough to drown in. Anen is still dressed. It occurs to him that he is naked and he wonders, groggy, when he rose to take off his clothes. Twisting where he lies, he can see the nightstand of his bed where there is a cola, and a water glass, and a half-eaten pack of crackers. He had been up, it seems. Awake. Existing in the silence yet unconscious of it, for Anen had come home and he had only just opened his tired eyes.

She stirs behind him. Her hand curls in her sleep, and her nails become six small pinpricks of pain. “Hey,” he says again, and shifts away. Her fingers, relaxing, trace the curve of his chest as he draws back: the intersection of rib and breast, the curve of it, and all his scars. A shiver follows her fingertips along him. Her skin is cold, like yesterday’s rain, and then it’s a corpse’s hand, it is cold and she is dying, he is dying, they are all of them dying. There is rot in their skin and in their hearts and in their bones and they are dying.

He gets out of bed. Her hand slips off him and hits the mattress, curling and uncurling, slowly, alive. Casper looks at it. Watches it move while she’s dreaming. He mimics a kiss in the sticky air, like it could find its way to her skin, like he could apologize for the weight of the heartache he carries with him, and walks to the dresser drawers for close-fitting clothes with which to bind the pain inside.

She stirs again. Murmurs something in Pheratz.
“It’s fine,” Casper says, and pulls a binder on. There’s some adjustment required, which reminds him of the gear, the bulletproof vests, the way each piece fit into place as they marched toward the first shuttles leaving Earth. They were pioneers. They were children, they all were: no one was ready to reach new stars. The launch techs hadn’t known if they’d even make it to the black, but they did. They all did. The shuttles passed the planet’s shield into the safe darkness of the void, and the binder pulls Casper’s breasts flat against his chest. He rubs at his chin and a facial scar and sighs.

He sees the whiteboard flashing through the open doorway to the other room. Her handwriting has replaced his: **Coming home early. For you.**

On Mars, she must have opened her tablet to see his story, and she had looked outside at the bone-dry wastes and took a sooner flight home.

He goes back to bed and sits on his side of it, where she lies facing him, awake. Anen opens each eye in turn until they are all fixed on him. “Why did you come back so soon?” he says, though he knows the answer now.

She makes a gesture he does not understand. “Didn’t. Have finished on Mars.”

“Did you?” Moving in, he slides his fingers over her skull. “Did you really?” Anen says nothing. She closes her eyes, then opens them one by one.

For all the good the VA promised it would do him, Casper does not recall ever seeing Anen’s favorite gesture, this slow cycle of blinking eyes, on the reintegration vid. There had been only simple expressions. **Happy?** The Alpheratzien on the vid had stared at him through threads of static. They had her chin, her aristocratic lines, but nothing else. A passing resemblance at best, and yet, in his memory, it is her, asking: **Happy?** Asking: **Sad?** One eye closed and then the next. **Worried?** A tip of the head; a shrug; a lowered jaw. **Am I happy? Am I sad?**

Casper leans in and kisses the smooth skin between each set of her eyes. Her breath is cool against his throat, his chin, and she hums in fond impatience until he shifts so that their lips will meet. Her head tips; he feels lashes brush his cheeks; his heart beats hard enough that the thunder of it rolls into his bones. She touches his back, touches the ridges of his uneven spine, and he kisses her again.

His thoughts go to the VA office, where some other vet was put in front of that vid tonight. Maybe they will fare better than he has. He might never pass. When the kiss breaks, however, she blinks at him, each eye in turn, and whether it is her kiss or her warmth or the feeling of falling deep, deep into her again, Casper winks back at her, twice, once on either side. He has only two eyes, so he does it again: once more on either side.

For the first time, she smiles. He can feel heat prickling his cheeks and a crow’s-foot crinkling at his eyes. He hears the city traffic outside their apartment and the smashing of a bottle against the street. Casper breathes in deeply.

**Happy?** Someone could ask him. **Sad?**

He touches the corners of her mouth and kisses her once more.