

*Life*

He awoke in the morning in someone else's bed. With his head on their pillow and his body stretched out on their mattress, his eyes peeped wearily open.

He felt the cool morning air in the room enter into his nostrils and tickle past his nose hairs. It swam gracefully down to his lungs and expanded in his chest and in his diaphragm. He held onto his breath for five seconds.

His fingers ran over the ripples in their bed-sheets, gently, back and forth, like he was floating on a textile river. He let go of his breath.

The air in his lungs floated slowly up and out of his chest and his throat and each nostril, and back out into the air and space above him, up to the high ceiling and further and further into the universe.

*Possessions*

For the next few weeks he would be house-sitting for his friends, Helen and Harry. He would be living in their house, sitting on their couch, watching their TV, eating off of their crockery, using their knives, looking at their family photos. He was going to be minding the territory that they had marked with their things. The things would still be theirs, but he would treat them like his own. He was doing this because he didn't have much else but time on his hands, time he could spend sitting in their house and looking after their dog, Bracha, who greeted him this morning by sitting upright beside him and placing a giant black schnauzer paw on his chest and barking hotly in his left ear.

For a giant schnauzer she was disconcertingly human. While he watched their TV she would sit directly in front of him, place a paw on his leg and whine until he held her paw and she would look into his eyes.

Lying there holding her paw in his hand on his chest, she was temporarily his, and he was fleetingly hers.

*Affirmations*

He loved to stare at their fridge magnets. He could stand in front of their fridge for hours self-affirming himself. They said things like "I am a self-confessed

chocoholic!” with a picture of a teddy bear with chocolate on his snout, or “it’s not how deep you fish, it’s how you wiggle your worm!” or “av-a-go-ya-mug!” There were postcards with elephants on them, teddy bears looking angry and otters floating on their backs. There was even a picture of Helen and Harry on a magnet, their faces stretched horizontally so that their smiles seemed to spread infinitely.

In their bathroom a little man hung from the mirror, his face was a cushion and his smile a red cotton V.

Above Harry’s workstation (a desk with a computer on it and lots of pieces of paper flung busily about) affirmations hung in bold print: “Fortune favours the brave!” and “Always ask why/ some men walk/ some must fly!”

He could not imagine ever getting depressed in such a house.

In their bedroom he had found a tube of lubricant on top of the bedside drawers. Leaning on the bedside table was a riding crop.

### *Every Self-Destroying -Up*

His psychologist had suggested that he get out into the community to get himself out of his funk, to get out of the house at any rate. He had had a couple of panic attacks. Once in a supermarket when he was buying cucumbers and another when he was just sitting in his room. There was a time in his life when, for instance, if he had the hiccups, he had wanted to kill himself. He used to get the hiccups a lot back then. Hiccups that would begin in his stomach and explode into his chest and strangle his throat as his whole body convulsed with them. They made him feel like his existence was uncontrollable and chaotic and the absurdity of embodiment violently struck him with each hicc- and the ensuing anxiety from this realisation would flood his body with every self-destroying -up.

### *Big Easy Mammal I*

To get himself out of the house, he had taken to doing favours for friends, thus the house sitting, and the baby-sitting he was doing this morning for another friend.

Having not been around babies much in his life, he initially found them to be frankly quite terrifying. Babies reminded him that entailed in his existence was the ability to make existence happen for other people. But when Yujin, his

friend Soo's baby, looked at him, out of all the things in the room to look at, when her eyes focused on *him*, he felt so touched, like he didn't have to do anything but exist in the world to be worthy of love and support. All his efforts to make people love him seemed foolish and in vain when in the gaze of baby Yujin.

After Soo left for work and he and Yujin were alone, he wanted to say something to her, to tell her how he felt about the way she made him feel. But looking at her he felt all the more certain that to communicate this in words would be ridiculous. Still he felt like he should say something. He put her down on her blanket.

"Hello," he said.

She continued to stare at him, mouth agog with wonder, brown eyes full of innocence. They looked like fully grown adult eyes, but in baby eye sockets. He didn't know how to continue.

"That's a whale."

He said, pointing to a blue whale hanging from the mobile that stretched in an arc from each corner of the blanket that she was on to the opposite corner to make an X-marked dome above her. From the mobile hung a seahorse, an octopus, a turtle, a starfish, a regular fish-shaped fish, and of course the whale. "The whale is a big mammal," he said.

"It is a big easy mammal."

He did not know why he said that.

He tried to cover that up.

"You are a little ...wiggly mammal."

He almost said "difficult mammal". He felt humans to be infinitely more difficult mammals than whales, and when he looked at her at that moment he imagined her at each age in her life and how everything was going to get more and more difficult and complicated.

He longed to be a big easy mammal.

He remembered what his psychologist had told him: not to project his fears and concerns into the future and to live in the present moment.

He took a deep breath and continued to look into the human eyes of Yujin.

He took ten more deep breaths and realised that Yujin was indeed a big easy mammal. Bigger than all her parts, lying on her back, tummy up and out and arms outstretched as she ran her legs up and down in place and kicked the air above her with wild abandon, she was completely uncomplicated. And that even though she was wiggling and every part of her was growing and moving

and slipping and sliding, there was a stillness about her that made him hear chimes and water rushing and nothing at all. He left Yujin and Soo feeling totally amazed.

### *Ebullience*

He had no plans for the rest of the day. The day was open and hanging there like a birdhouse hanging from a tree. He would fly right into the day, he decided. Fly, fly, fly!

However, this thought swiftly left him and he found himself walking, walking down grey-coloured streets that reminded him of walking down the very same streets with his ex-girlfriend.

Walking past a Vietnamese restaurant she had been trying to make conversation and said, “The duck there is good.”

Things weren’t going well for them at that time. He’d said, “I’ve never eaten duck before.”

They had both continued walking down the street; looking at the street, at their shoes. He had thought about the duck he’d never eaten. Once when he was out with her and some of her friends that he didn’t know very well, he sat next to a guy who was eating duck. He had barely spoken to him, the guy just ate the duck and he looked at the duck the guy was eating out the corner of his eye while he was eating his green vegetables and white rice.

“I once sat next to someone who was eating duck.”

She had looked into his eyes.

“That’s not eating duck.”

The memory depressed him.

He took a deep breath. And he tried not to live in his past, but a flood of images and sentences filled his mind and he started to feel sick with himself.

He took another deep breath.

And another.

He remembered a time when he had been walking down another street with her, and he asked her what she wanted for dinner, She had said, after tucking her lips in and humming quietly for a second: “soup.”

He asked her what kind of soup, and she said, “ebullient.”

He exhaled.

That was what he liked about her, and about people in general: that they had the

power to make soup ebullient if they wanted.

*If You Could Think of Yourself as Plural*

He found himself, of all places, at the contemporary art gallery. He had not been inside an art gallery in years. In high school he had studied art, and walking around he was amazed at what people had done. He had no idea that in art you could do anything. And that was ok. And it helped other people. There was a video of a girl smashing a giant clock with a stick. The clock turned out to be piñata and after exerting considerable violence upon it a cascade of miscellaneous stuff came tumbling out; clock parts, teddy bears, tiny dresses, goofy toys, alarms clocks, radios, all covered the floor around her. Then she was doing the same to a giant pink piñata pig, the camera moved to a bird's eye view and the pig turned out to be a piggie-bank pig and while she was taking to it with an axe the sound of squealing pigs could be heard. It was disconcerting, but it looked immeasurably cathartic.

Another artist had blown up his payslip from Croissant Express to be about a metre and half by half a metre. The artist had done a video art installation of himself at his work and working on his art on a number of little TVs. The explanation next to it said that it was meant to cause a sense pathos and futility. He didn't want to feel pathos and futility.

He kept staring at the giant payslip. He liked that idea. He imagined the people at his old work handing him his payslip that size on his last day, like the cardboard cheques you see people giving to charities or to people who have won the lottery. He imagined them handing him a giant payslip and then shaking his hand, and all of his colleagues applauding and smiling, beaming at him as he walked past holding his cheque under one arm and waving at them triumphantly with the other.

He couldn't help but smile.

Through a series of turns into space after space, he found himself in a hexagonal room. Light blue, light yellow, white, dark and light grey coloured triangles covered the walls and a light blue bench sat at the bottom of each wall with eight head phones placed on it at equal intervals.

He was alone in the room in the room.

He picked up a set of headphones, placed them over his ears and sat down.

Chimes, a low bass humming, and cricket-like clicking panned from ear to ear across his brain.

A woman's voice was speaking with a slight accent. She was saying things like, "when you wonder how far it's going to go." "What is the threshold of going too far?" "When you want to have an understanding of who you are and why you do things." "If you could give your thoughts the weight that they deserve" He sat staring at the Op art wall that seemed to be moving and he felt every breath in his nose, in his lungs, in his heart. He could feel his chest rising and falling, rising and falling. He felt alive and living. He looked at the seven empty headsets and wished there was someone else to share it with. He closed his eyes and he listened. "How do you prepare yourself to do something?" "Do you think you stay the same or do you improve?" "If you could have the confidence to talk about yourself, even if it's boring." He opened his eyes when a small woman with short brown hair in a short brown dress wandered into the hexagon, purveyed the room with her hands behind her back and sat down directly opposite him, but with her knees pointing to one side. She held the headphones over her ears with her hands and listened intently. He was so grateful that she was in the room. He wanted to smile at her. She closed her eyes and they both sat there together listening to the same thing. He wondered what she was feeling. He barely knew what he was feeling. He tried to concentrate on that. "If you could think of yourself as plural, and everyone else as a part of you." At that she opened her eyes, and briefly smiled at him.

### *Big Easy Mammal II*

He decided to walk home across a playing field he would have usually walked around. The smell of the green green grass thrust up his nostrils and every scent receptor in his nose welcomed it with open tiny receptor arms. Some people were stretching their muscles near a soccer goal, and just looking at them made his muscles yearn to stretch and wake with them. He rolled his shoulders up to his ears and back down, and put his hands snugly in his coat pockets. People in comfortable-looking track pants were walking big fluffy dogs around the perimeter. The sun touched each blade of grass with a finger,

the kind of finger that would press itself to the lips of a loved one. By the time he had almost gotten to the other end of the playing field, he realised that he was in no rush and sat down on a bench near the outskirts of the field and continued to enjoy the smell of lawn in his nose and feel of the sun on his cheeks. He even closed his eyes. After about fifteen breaths he felt a presence beside him and opened his eyes to see a young girl, about four or five years old, sitting next to him on the bench, her legs dangling down. "Do you want a yan-yan?" she asked, earnestly, with pity and compassion in her eyes. She offered a red tube with long biscuits in one compartment and chocolate dip in the other. The air felt cleaner and warmer all of a sudden for him, the sun lighter, the trees crisper. He felt touched by her generosity, looked into her eyes and thanked her as he took long biscuit out of the tube. On one end there was a tiny little picture of a whale just like the whale on Yujin's mobile. On the other end were the words, "biggesy mammal."

### *A Little Dove*

Upon arriving home he felt an immense pressure in his bladder. So immense it had started to tickle. It was all he could think about. His entire being seemed to be directed towards emptying his bladder of this enormous weight. It would be unnatural not to wee. He left the keys on the kitchen table and continued towards the bathroom. As he was closing the door Bracha snuck in with him and began drinking from the water bowl next to the toilet. He unzipped his fly and guided his penis toward the bowl below it and felt the warm stream issuing so naturally from him. He was completely conscious of every cell in his body, he could feel himself emptying and he had the most reassuring feeling that this was meant to be happening, that this was the only thing he was meant to be doing at this present moment and it was beauty itself. He looked down at his warm and meek penis, held in his right hand like a little dove, and he began to laugh.

