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# The poems

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The day Saddam tries to die, Will has already written a hundred poems about his origami palms clenched into a fist, about that fist clenched around his own throat. There's nothing poetic about the hole in the noose, but it's everything around it that makes her feel like she's drowning.

That's not bad, actually, she thinks to herself. She should write that down.

When Saddam pops 29 capsules of Panadol like they are skittles, the carcasses of the blister packets scattered on his bedside table, Will is suspended in the supermarket buying tampons and orange juice. Will is saying, 'Excuse me, do you have any extra pulp juice out the back?' And Jonathon from Aisle 7 in Coles is replying, 'Not today, sorry.'

An hour later when Saddam is tying a bag around his head, Will is getting bank statements authenticated. She needs to convince the University of Berkeley in California, where she been accepted for a semester of screenplay studies in January, that she has $10,000. Obviously, she doesn't actually have $10,000, but if she combines her academic scholarship, all of her savings and a hefty loan from her parents, which she is really very proud of, then she is officially in possession of $10,000.48.

She stops in to see her boss and he tells her that Rachel calls in sick after every payday, and he is going to have to let Rachel go and he is so disappointed in Rachel. She says that she is very sorry and leaves with some stale pita and a recalled coffee

order. There is dirt under her nails she can't get out, and Saddam is sitting on the edge of his mattress in loose, grey underwear, waiting to see if he is going to die.

Saddam calls the police at 4.57 pm and she is walking back to her car. It is too hot on Kembla Street. She reaches her car, starts the engine and indicates to pull away from the curb. Sonal calls her, breathless with excitement, and says, 'Saddam has gone.'

'What are you talking about?' asks Will.

'The police and the ambulance came, and he tried to kill himself, but it didn't work and now he's in the hospital. I don't know where his parents are, do you know them? The police asked, but I don't even know where he's from. Did he sign the lease? I don't remember.'

A runner, wet through with sweat, pounds past her. Her indicator is still going tick-ticktick-tick-tick.

Later that night, she will stand in the kitchen watching his bread go green while everyone else sleeps. She will imagine she can hear the scrape of painkillers down his throat. She will swear she can hear him breathing plastic. She's going to write poems about this; poems that taste like ink and salt. She'll say that it was a rainy Tuesday and no-one was answering their phones, and she went to the hospital by herself and couldn't even pronounce his last name. She'll write that Sonal's phone call felt like the skin of a mandarin between teeth, syrupy white veins wrapped around her tongue. She doesn't know what that means exactly, but it sounds beautiful.

It is beautiful.

Will eats her pita in the hospital waiting room and thinks of titles for her suite of poems. She is thinking something forlorn: 'The Long Winter', 'The Plastic Bag of Truth.' Well not that. But something like that.

When Saddam returns, all hollow eyes and heavy bones and depression you can almost taste, he sits beside her.

'What's happening?' Will asks him, and he shakes his head.

'I'm going to psych,' he murmurs.

Will doesn't know where to touch him. She doesn't know where it hurts, so she rests her head awkwardly on his shoulder and his skin pulls at her hair but she tries not to move anyway, even though it hurts.

The nurse returns and says they've found a bed for him. She says to Will, 'You're his next of kin?'

Will shrugs, Saddam nods and the nurse says, 'You can stay if you like.'

It feels as if Will's eyes are retreating back into her skull and she really just wants to go home. But you can't very well tell a suicidal man that you don't want to spend time with him. So she says, 'Of course.' She tries to mean it, and she follows him to the mental health ward with her lips pressed together so she doesn't say something passive aggressive. She wants to bear the grief of this as exquisitely as she can. Years from now, she wants to look back at pictures of herself, charmingly sad on old deck chairs and think, 'Look how brave and strong I was, despite everything.'

There are three other patients in the mental health ward, and they are all huddled with a partner, whispering and crying, whispering and crying. Saddam lays on the thin, metal bed and covers himself as if he is a corpse with the hospital sheets. It feels like he is preparing himself for burial, so Will clambers into bed beside him, head on bony shoulder, sweaty hand in sweaty hand until the nurse tells her cuddling is not allowed in the mental health ward. This seems unreasonable, but there's not much she can do about it so she gets back up and sits — stiff and

exhausted — in the guest chair. She puts her head in the indent of his waist and he scratches behind her ear like a cat.

The nurse still doesn't approve.

They wait until she asks Will to go, only 20 minutes more, and then she leaves him alone on that metal bed in the middle of that disinfected floor, looking as though nothing at all anchored him there and he could drift away at any moment.

Will is hoping for something mournful like Coldplay or Arctic Monkeys, but the radio at two in the morning is all Nicki Minaj. Will's car is old and loud; the engine rattles and she tries to ignore it. She wonders if it would be disrespectful to masturbate when she gets home, to lie in bed and touch herself dramatically, feverishly. How long are you typically meant to wait for that sort of thing? She probably shouldn't have an orgasm for at least a week after an attempted suicide. She is meant to be starving herself, and not sleeping. Or sleeping a lot. She can never remember how Grief is meant to act.

Will imagines Grief in a cardigan with white buttons, with lank hair and a silver necklace and she walks with her head down, but Will doesn't know if she eats, or sleeps, or ever has sex. Will doesn't think Grief is real. All she does is cry and lose things.

* * *

Saddam is discharged three days later, during a heat wave.

He is waiting on the hot, grey pavement outside the hospital, like trash for pickup. Will scoops him up and pulls back onto the main road in silence.

What do you say to someone who wants to die? All Will can think is don't, don't, don't; a litany of insubstantial prayer; things he has already repeated to himself under the doona at two in the morning, and she wonders if they will have more or less effect said by her over the rattling second-hand engine.

The door of the share house is open like always. Brad and Sonal are posed in the kitchen like mannequins. Sonal crosses and uncrosses her legs. Brad bares his teeth and holds up two mugs and says.'Tea.'

'Act naturally,' Will says under her breath, so Brad and Sonal start making the tea extra robotically.

The fridge has a lot to say. There are four or five letters from the real estate agents, reminding them not to hang towels on the porch railing, to take the bins out on Sundays, five overdue notices for rent, to please, please let them know who is living there because only Alex is on the lease and there are seven bedrooms.

A fruit fly has his wispy legs sunk into an abandoned Sara Lee lasagna on the counter. Poor fly, Will thinks. He only has a day to live, and he's spending it sinking into white sauce.

Will and Saddam sit at the dining room table. Everything is sweaty and terrible.

'Hello,' Sonal says seriously from across the other end of the table. She looks like she is about to launch into a corporate presentation.

Each roommate moves into a pre-arranged position and waits for Saddam's imminent monologue. They pause there, heads inclined in sympathy. Brad sets down a cup of English Breakfast, which Saddam looks at for a moment. The milk clouds into the tea.

'I hate my name sometimes,' Saddam says into the tea, 'but it's not my parents fault, you know. It used to be a good name. It used to mean good things.'

Will thinks there probably isn't an appropriate response to this, so she doesn't say anything.

Saddam lifts his head and squints at them all; half-baked statues in a mouldy kitchen. There is something rotting sweetly under the refrigerator.

'I am so, so sad,' he says to no-one in particular, and then leaves them there.

Will hears him fumble with the lock for a few minutes, realise that she has messed with it, and gives up. She doesn't know if he should be in a room alone, and definitely not his room because it smells like weed and struggling cinnamon incense and it's always a mess. It's full of artsy, lopsided photographs of ordinary objects and a neon replica of Dorian Gray's hideous portrait. He has this enormous poster above his bed, so that people will know right away how deep and sensitive he is. He buys pingas instead of coat hangers because coat hangers do not contribute to real living. Real living is about insomnia and bongs and not doing your laundry when you should. He keeps a shabby Quran on a milk carton by the bed and two weeks ago when Will accidentally sat on it, he cried and cried and wouldn't stop.

Will goes to her room to write. She wants to say something deep, something about being left behind. She is thinking train stations, winter, dark, intensely sad imagery and a metaphor for death that might involve a ghost gum and a lorikeet. Her favorite stanza so far is:

> It is the long afternoon on the day you left
> that I spent at the station missing train after train.
> I thought it would feel
> like a poem come to life.
> Instead it felt like winter
> building a home in my bones.

It is very meta-fictional and emotional, and she actually chokes up when she reads it aloud. Unfortunately, she doesn't know what she means by it.