

## Headstone

One. Two. Three.

I count my footsteps in the snow. It is the best way to drown out the noise in my mind.

Four. Five. Six.

Like a countdown, bringing me closer and closer and closer still to oblivion. I think my mind will burst. I half expect that at any moment now reality itself will collapse under the weight of this manic agony.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

Nothing happens. It never does.

I would rather it did. I would rather rot and shudder in prison than be forced to live a life that is not a life. Even now *he*, that man, caught as he is, hanging on the edge of existence, is more alive than me, though he may die at any day and I might live for years more. Years. Decades. My God, the thought is awful. I am afraid. It is not that I am scared of being caught – not now. More I am frightened of living. Every morning when I wake from restless nights I pull the sheets over my head in fear – fear of leaving my room, fear of going on, fear of seeing faces that always shape themselves into hers.

The best I can do is to pretend that I am some tragic hero from the plays I teach, to pretend that it was always coming to this, that everything has been inevitable. I am not sure if that is true. And yet if you had seen her you would not blame me. If you could see her face, her figure, her lips, her hair, the way she speaks and moves, then I know you would not blame me. You would understand. And you would pity me too, if you knew anything of love.

Because I do love her. Love, mingled with envy, with pain, with fury, is still love. That is the only thing I know.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

The cold water from these school sinks will not wash this ugly stain from my heart. Every lesson is a torture. I must teach children life when I myself am not alive – not truly, not really, not anymore. My mind is crushed. My name printed on the blackboard is a hollow thing. The words I speak are empty. The children torture me with their innocent smiles.

I am scared. I am scared of myself.

Thirteen.

That number lingers in my head as I take another step. I have been unlucky. Either that, or I have been wrong.

Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen.

I am haunted by four images – four memories, if you will. The first is a rugged and twisted face whose mouth forms twisted words. He says, consistently, repeatedly, over and over again like some

dreadful chant, “your face is like a ghost’s.” I wish I was a ghost. I wish I was insubstantial, that I could disappear.

The second memory is of blood on my fists, of barely knowing what I am thinking, of knowing exactly what I am doing.

The third memory is her, not one memory but several blurred together, overlapped, all merging into her face, her face, her face, repeated in every corner of my mind. She is never smiling. She never moves. She is like a statue to me, cold, oblivious, unresponsive. She stares. She frowns. She glares. That is all. Her features never soften for me. She is my ruin, my lovely ruin. I told her so, once, in what seems another world ago, long before this trembling pain, this strange madness. She has destroyed me, and destroys me still.

The fourth image is no memory at all, and yet it is the worst, by far the worst. I see them slip rings onto each other’s fingers. I see them whispering words of love. I see, shuddering, her at his bedside, her hand in his hand, her lips on his lips. I cannot bear it. I cannot go on much longer.

Seventeen. Eighteen.

Still I am under some wretched spell. Still I am enchanted, and I am doomed. I will count my footsteps, for it is the only way to keep going. But even that is not enough, for now those lingering ghostly memories are reality, and life is the distraction, the distraction from what I have done.

Nineteenth. Twenty.

God would not forgive me, because I do not repent. I do not regret – or, at least, I do, but not that, not that. I wish that I had finished him properly. If the water had been higher, if I had held him longer, if my blows had been harder, if I had planned it better–

But that wish is too recent, too awful to think; to do it completely would have only caused a duller pain. I wish, then, that I had never seen her, or that she had never seen him. I wish she had seen me differently. I can picture the heights I could have reached by seeing the depths I have fallen to now.

I look at the river beside me as I walk. I am lower now than this ground, than this water. I have sunk down into hell, and the white snow at my feet is a bitter contrast to the blood that still, still, stains my hands.

Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

Look at what I have done. My deed has only added to my doom, has faster made me hate myself; because now I know what I always knew: she loves him. And so now it is I, the almost-murderer, who is being murdered by them.

Twenty-three. Twenty-four.

My feet are freezing in the snow. I have walked too far and still, on and on, on and on until I reach my destination.

Twenty-five.

Here I stand. The rush of the fire burns my cold heart.

Yes, yes, I know why I am here. Another figure to haunt me, this rugged snarling face. I can see that now. I would pay the world to stop these hauntings, and yet I have nothing, nothing. I have lost my dignity and my respectability and my concentration and my hope and any wealth I ever had – so I have nothing to give.

And I have lost her.

I know, I know. I planned it all out well. I am a clever man, if I am anything. A criminal has to cover his tracks.

I cannot focus on his words. My thoughts stray back to the river, back to the blood on my hands and I strike, again, again, again. I repeat the crime that damns me still. Over and over. Again and again.

Twenty-six.

I am outside. I feel the wind rush past my face and I hardly know how I got here. My feet move, but in my mind it is only my fists that work. Over and over. Again and again.

The memory breaks. It shatters into her face.

I want to scream.

Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine.

I turn back. There are too many things that I cannot shake off. This rogue, for one; myself, for another. I cannot get rid of them any more than I can shake the blood from my hands, though I have tried to spill it onto someone else.

My mind is burning.

It is enough. It is enough. I shall face my doom. My fate was decided long ago, carved into my flaws and passion.

Thirty. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine–

For my last crime I knew what I was doing. Now I do not. A second murder to make up for my failed first.

And a third, too, in a way. I wonder what words will be written on my headstone.

Forty.

I will not let go. I will not change my mind. I have always been coming to this. And now, resolved, I do not struggle for air. I do not pant or kick my legs or try to swim. The current is strong; it has been pulling me down for weeks.

The image returns one last time. I see her face, cold, staring, emotionless, beautiful. Breath slips from me as I sink. I hate you as much as I love you now.

Lizzie, watch me drown.