THE GHOST OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

This poem is based on Rossetti’s poems and biography. Phrases in italics are from Rossetti’s writings and papers.

My sister warns me not to pick the strawberries until they are ripe enough. I return to the hedge near my grandfather’s cottage. I watch daily as they grow, reddening, a heavy sweetness I breathe in. I finger the brittle leaves and seeded skin, but snails eat them all first.

I learn to wait for what I want, and if it fades before it is mine, I am better off never having what I want in God’s eyes. Fairytales, nursery rhymes, my nun-sister teach me this lesson, too. My brother, Dante Gabriel, takes what he wants without punishment. I fear for his soul. I hear both Italian and English, words from both languages. I love the Italian songs my poet-father sings to us: *Mie care figliuole son fresche viole dischiuse all’albor . . . nel nido d’amor.* He fled Naples during a revolt.

Studying Dante, my father loses himself in The Inferno. My sister is the brilliant one but is even better at shutting the doors, becoming a governess and then a nun. I am able to avoid both vocations. William, my oldest brother, is the quiet one, taking in everything so he can write about us later, always taking care of us. My mother runs a school when my father can’t go out of the house any more.

I can’t avoid nursing my father. He doesn’t know where he is, and he is going blind. Alone with him in the house, he tells me I look like my mother when she was young. He cries and yells until I climb into his bed. I like the way he cups my face and strokes my hair, quieting, looking at me intensely, my beloved papa. And I obey when he tells me to unfasten my dress and lie closer, soothing him, but I freeze as his hands move down me. I never tell what happens next.

I become good at freezing myself. But at fourteen when I can’t feel anything, and I know I should be punished for my secret, I try to break out of my skin, out of the house, cutting my arms open with my scissors, smashing everything.
How ironic to sit as Mary in her girlhood for my brother’s painting. My mother models for St. Anne. Does she know the secret I keep? Gold halos circling our faces, my long hair unpinned and falling down my back, innocently. We work an embroidery design together, entangled. I stare off into the distance, not meeting my mother’s eyes or the viewer’s eyes. And I am Mary for my brother’s painting of the Annunciation. In a white nightgown I crouch in bed as the angel offers me lilies, a dove bursting into the room. I am ready to leave. In a woodcut, I am one of many weeping queens in King Arthur’s court. All of us sit in a circle, tears and hair flowing, all of us crowned.

An unfinished portrait by a painter who loves me is truer, a feather painted behind me, my thoughts, my quill pen, my hair pulled back tightly, seriously watching, not sure what is ahead of me, what else my gray eyes will see. I don’t fall in love with him. But I do fall in love with another painter and, later, a scholar. The painter breaks off our engagement because he loves God more than me. He thinks I understand his calling perfectly, but I let the fire-breathing monsters in my poems speak the truth.

The other man is a blind buzzard. We caress each other through our poems. He takes four years to propose. By then, my feelings, like the waves of the Northern Sea, crash and spend themselves on the beach where I go to recover. I tell him he isn’t religious enough.

I want fame, but I don’t tell anyone this. And I don’t tell them I write epics instead of the ladies’ verses all the reviewers like. My fairytales aren’t just for children. Goblins, monsters, crocodiles, ghosts are part of us. Another part of us, a sister, keeps us from our worst selves, from eating rotten fruit.

A prince procrastinates on his journey to save the sleeping princess from near death. He takes all the wrong paths, like my brother. The princess dies before the prince reaches her with the healing potion. Is she my brother’s wife who died, exhumed from the grave years later when it was too late? Me waiting for a magic kiss, a proposal, a bed I’m afraid to enter? The unattended soul?
I travel to Italy, Switzerland behind us, we plunged down, all Italy before us, the mountain slope of St. Gotthard covered in forget-me-nots. An owl had satisfied my need, but I never find what I am looking for. In England my burnt-black hair and sun-warmed skin are foreign, and in Italy my snowy manners won’t melt away. I turn to the bleak North, the South lies out of reach.

While my brother visits the riverside pleasure gardens, plucks a streetwalker to take back to his bed, then to his studio to paint, I take the evening watch at St. Mary Magdalene’s Home. Prostitutes can find refuge here. Most are young girls living on London’s foggy streets, suddenly appearing from the swirling fog in doorways. They are falling, falling, falling. Tonight, I watch them sleeping, cocooned in warm beds.

Instead of this heart of stone, ice-cold, I want scalding tears. I lock doors against my moods, but I hear them at the watery coastline, and I catch a glimpse of them, a pale gleam come and gone as quick as thought, which might be hand or hair. They draw me out into the cold sea. While I am gone, I tell everyone I am ill. My brother is kept in a stone house near the sea. He is afraid to go out, hears everyone whispering about him, sits in the dark like my father. Only reading my poems or drawing a portrait of me brings him back.

The girl in my story is chased by Quills, Angles, whose corners almost cut her, Hooks, a scowling Queen. No one can help the girl. She is tempted by fruits, and as she reaches for them, glowing like lanterns, a glass castle grows around her. When she escapes, she meets an eyeless boy whose mouth is filled with tusks. He wants what she carries in her basket. She will say, “No!” scaring them all away, find her grandmother’s house, the northern lights, each hill as if it smouldered, ready to burst into a volcano.

Fevers take me. I can’t hold a pen steady, my throat is swollen, my hair falls out, my eyes bulge. I avoid mirrors. After a year like this, my doctor tells me I have Graves’ Disease. I’m not ready to go to my grave. I recover, but I am no longer young. There are two deaths: my brother and sister. I know Maria flies to heaven. Gabriel does not. Before he dies, he
screams, holding his arms out. I hope his Beatrice with flaming hair and green dress enters them.

I want to use my fame to help others. I speak for animals’ rights. Many are dissected alive without anesthesia. I do it in memory of an orange tabby cat I ran to after nursing my father. She let me hold her. I write prayer books, matching saints with English flowers. I’m not allowed to be a preacher, but I can still help you find maternal love from God, better. And I learn to trust the fatherly God again, his hands reaching out for me.

Unnamed lady, I will speak for you and your sisters, too, fourteen Lady Troubadours, monna innominata. My father wrote about Beatrice as the personified secret at the heart of religious worship. I think she is a real person, and I am ancestress to Petrarch’s Laura. We become speaking subjects in fourteen sonnets, a sonnet of sonnets. In these poems, I remember when I first met my love, half turn to go yet turning stay.