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*Elizabethan
Sonnets*

Christopher Whitby

Preface

These sonnets were first published in 2021 in a short run privately printed book dedicated to my daughter on her 21st birthday. They are only truly Elizabethan because her name is Elizabeth and they are poems that in one way or another she has caused to be.

At the end of the book there are some background notes as there are a few references in the poems that will always be more recognisable to Elizabeth and me than could be possible to other readers. In this internet version I have put these notes below each sonnet. Feel free to read them first or second, or not at all, as you see fit.

The sonnets have been performed interspersed with live music under the title 'Letting Go'. To give a taste of this I have given links to YouTube performances of the music and songs that were chosen (the musicians and arrangements are necessarily different and I cannot guarantee that the links will always work, nor remove the adverts).

Apart from the fun of combining poems and music, I have long been convinced by elements of Dana Gioia's influential 1991 essay in *Atlantic Monthly* 'Can Poetry Matter?' and especially these lines:

The established rituals of the poetry world – the readings, small magazines, workshops, and conferences – exhibit a surprising number of self-imposed limitations. Why, for example, does poetry mix so seldom with music, dance, or theater?...When arts administrators plan public readings, they should avoid the standard subculture format of poetry only. Mix poetry with the other arts, especially music.

For a Child's Christening

(at which it was sung)

If all the world's a stage, then be the fool
and speak your mind, without offence, to all,
whatever parts they play. And in the school
of wit find wisdom and the verve to call
to strict account whatever seems to bear
no sense, or right, or goodness in its heart.
Life has its luck. The trick is not to care
how much or little Fortune holds your part,
but taking all with equal thanks and grace,
in looking sideways at the world's affairs,
reveal the truths that lie behind the face
and light the dark that coats us unawares.
So, motley minded and obliquely just,
be yet a touchstone in whom all may trust.

Music

The score of the SATB setting by Eleanor Graff-Baker can be found at www.chriswhitby.org.uk/alltheworld.pdf. No recording was made when first sung at the christening. Before putting on the internet a subsequent recording played at the Letting Go concert, or indeed any other, I need to seek permissions.

Several echoes of Shakespeare, of course. This was set to a capella music (SATB) by Elizabeth's mother, and sung at Elizabeth's christening on 2 January 2002. The score is based on Elizabeth's initials EAGW – W on its side becoming the final B natural.

Just So

The camel just said... ‘Humph!’ Elizabeth replies – she does a good ‘Humph!’ – but as I watch her smile, something snatches at my breath and I am adrift on a Medusa raft of memories, eyeing each other up. I feel the water lap about my thigh as my father sitting by my bath reads ‘Humph!’ and grins a scowl with all his storyteller’s craft.

A younger son, I don’t expect to feel the weight of family continuity or have tradition dragging at my heel, and yet... and yet, I’d almost ask for more if he and I could co-exist again and fuse, O Best Beloved, my now and then.

Music

The Camel’s Hump

Words: Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Music: Edward German (1862-1936)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwJ3kLbhNs0>

Key references here are ‘How the Camel Got his Hump’ in Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So* stories for children (O Best Beloved) and the wreck of the French ship The Medusa (Méduse) in 1816 when 151 people crammed onto a raft. The few who survived did so at the deliberate expense of others.

Party Frock

‘Give us a twirl,’ I said and so she did
(thus marking out some territory – men
don’t do twirls). Weaving straps and flounce she hid
herself behind the conjured image, then
with new-spun adult confidence enquired:
‘You think?’ ‘You’ll slay them all,’ I said, not sure
if that was quite the answer she required
but sensing needs not prominent before.

*Oh take it off! Put on your jeans again.
Let me be Mr Grumpkin still. In such
small acts I feel you slipping through the cup
my hands once made for you and hate it when
you bring me face to face with just how much
I want-admire-resent your growing up.*

Music

Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy from The Nutcracker
Suite by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV1qLYukTH8>

Elizabeth was 8 when she came into the kitchen and did
as described. The poem was published online in issue 6 of
[*14 by 14*](#) (23 October 2008).

Once Upon a Time

Down past the bottom of the garden where
the fairies used to live, I spied again
our secret hideaway, that tree root den
where we would blithely squirrel in to share
the harvest of the day, each peach, pear, plum
before they rotted, even as we sought
to bury deep the kernel of some thought
for fear of harsher winters yet to come.
It's overgrown of course, like us. And should
there still be some dark matter underground,
what purpose might it serve if ever found
again, there being no way through the wood?
Let be. We shift as we may to the end,
not least your long lost, invisible friend.

Music

Sí Bheag Sí Móhr (Small Fairy Mound, Big Fairy Mound)
by Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738) It is sometimes
regarded as a slow air but we played it up tempo like
this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMItK2PNAOk>

A bit sinister towards the end perhaps but mainly
occasioned by wondering where Elizabeth's invisible friend
went and what he thinks now. When here, he was a force to
be reckoned with.

Sonatina

To say it was a miracle is too
much hype. Yet what are miracles but things
we can't explain, experience that brings
us up short, scorning what we thought we knew?

I'll say it was a wonder then to be
so roused from work next door as to be made
to listen to the Dvorak as she played
not now a caged exam piece but let free

to soar and slip as if she *were* its joys
and sorrows. And I wept for what has been,
has not and never will be, all I'd seen
and known and lost, what time and love destroy.

But did the music really make me cry
or hearing then a part of childhood die?

Music

Sonatina for Violin and Piano in G major, Op. 100, I.
allegro risoluto by Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yesv0yTR5qI>

The Dvorak music is opus 100, first movement. Elizabeth was probably 11 and when practising the violin part, she did all of a sudden play it in a way that demanded attention. The poem lay dormant in bits and pieces for some 10 years, but was finally put together. It resonates with one of my favourite lines of Tom Stoppard: 'Maturity is a high price to pay for growing up' (*Where Are They Now?*).

Crash Site

'Invest,' they said. 'Put something by to make
the future brighter. While you may not get
back all that you put in, most people take
the risk and find it is a worthwhile bet.'
And so we did, with money, time and no
less love than we thought then we could afford.
For fifteen years we watched our nest egg grow
and blithely thought the future was assured.
But come the day our stock, with others, fell
to earth from thirty thousand feet – they call
it still 'bad luck' – I lost the words to tell
the worth or price of anything at all.
A sleepless bankrupt now, most days I try
in vain to find the means to just get by.

Music

In Summer Time on Bredon

Words: A. E. Housman (1859-1936)

Music: Graham Peel (1877-1937)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga6q8M17txk>

I had occasion once to retouch the background of a school
publicity photograph of a smiling sixth form boy and girl.
A few years later I learned that the young man was on
flight MH17, shot down over Ukraine. One cannot help
sometimes but imagine if it were one's own offspring. The
extended metaphor is very artificial, but what words can
really suffice?

Dismantling the Past

The blow-up swimming pool is looking for a home and now the climbing frame just lies unbolted, played out on the ground, a poor paint peeling testament to 'how time flies'. In recent years you could not say it's been much more than trellis for some climbing plants though easy memory screens times he's seen his upside down child eyeing him askance before the grin of *look what I can do*. And on occasion, even when 'too old', he's caught her sat on top while in the view perhaps some problem melted, thinned, grew cold. She will not leave. Again he sees her there, reflective still suspended in the air.

Music

The Song is Ended (but the Melody Lingers on) by Irving Berlin (1888-1989)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PB5UNDp9kzU>

Elizabeth's gone to drama school. Things change but the memories linger, snapshots in the mind.

Station

As they walk towards the platform stairs
to say goodbye again, he drops a pace
behind and marvels at the poise her face
and stride announce, as if she wears her cares
quite lightly now, her mother's chat returned
with ease, all legs and university,
so self-assured, the old timidity
perhaps just worn away by new things learned.
But no, erosion's not made her acquire
this upbeat personality he sees.
First terms unsettle, bend, break, melt and squeeze
new shapes the second hardens in the fire.
Inside he weeps. now understands in part
how, long ago, he broke his mother's heart.

Music

The Gas Man Cometh

Words: Michael Flanders (1922-1975)

Music: Donald Swan(1923-1994)

A song that perfectly embodies the cyclical nature of
life's events.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1dvAxA9ib0>

Written after we took Elizabeth to Rugby station to catch a
train to London to start her third term at Italia Conti
Academy of Theatre Arts.

DIY

Despite the arts degrees I've always been quite capable at DIY, with skills acquired from all the times that I have seen my father patching work with hand saws, drills and faith in glue and screw ("It holds things more secure than simply nails"), who'd boil up glue in stinking pots on mother's stove before the dawning of the age of B&Q, which brought to laymen's hands a tool for every purpose under heaven and no less a glue for every need, it seemed, so as a rule I'd answer 'Daddy, can you mend this?' with a yes. But now I do not know quite where to start as she holds out the broken pieces of her heart.

Music

Niel Gow's Lament for his Second Wife by Niel Gow (1727-1807)

Music of love, longing and sorrow.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0IPgvK9ibQ>

I have been mender-in-chief for broken objects. For non-British readers (or those in some distant future) B&Q is a large hardware and tool store chain.

Miss Gossage

Oh what a silly billy! How could he
pretend that he had had so many wives,
all popped it but the last, as if their lives
meant nothing to him? Silly sausage me
to fall for that at first. I don't know why
he'd pull my leggers so, but Mumsy said
that choosers can't be beggars and I've read
that men can just spout piffle when they're shy.

I'm sure he's not a ladies' man at all
and only wants a girl to call his own.
So sad to see him reading all alone,
no woman's touch, a bat without a ball.
Imagine – biscuits! – if he never knew
what spiffing things athletic girls can do.

Music

None. This and the next sonnet were treated as a pair.

Written on commission from Elizabeth as she played Miss Gossage in John Dighton's farce *The Happiest Days of Your Life* in her second year. Cricket-mad gym mistress Miss Gossage ("you can call me sausage") has fallen for the confirmed bachelor schoolmaster Mr Billings who, in order to discourage her, has 'explained' that a photo of his 5 aunts that she has found is in fact a photo of his 4 previous wives (deceased) and his current one whom he also expects to meet her end soon and leave him her money!

Mr Billings

My God, the woman's absolutely mad
stark staring bonkers, like some fury sent
to haunt our gentle settled ways, hell bent
avenging sins we never knew we had.
What's more, a frightful cricket fiend. That's quite
unnatural – it's not a woman's game –
and brings me restless nights, each dream the same:
Miss Gossage padded up! A ghastly sight.
I don't know why my idle brain makes such
a fuss of her. She's only passing through,
please God! A billy bally banshee who
can b-beetle off without me in her clutch.
She'll lick my envelopes indeed! What kind
of woman would do that in her right mind?

Music

Heute Nacht oder nie by Mischa Spoliansky (1898-1985),
who wrote the score for the film version of the play. Miss
Gossage would be for 'heute nacht' (tonight), while Mr B
would definitely be for the alternative 'nie' (never).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghfGn1Kj0Qw>

His view. At one point letters home by pupils at the boys'
school are left open so they can be censored. Miss Gossage
offers to lick the envelopes that Mr Billings must seal: "My
tongue's hanging out!"

Sonnet in a Bottle

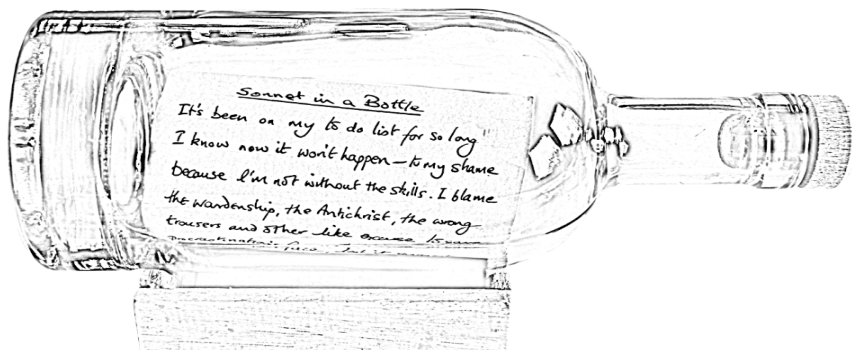
It's been on my to do list for so long
I know now it won't happen – to my shame
because I'm not without the skills. I blame
the wardenship, the Antichrist, the wrong
trousers and other like excuse to save
procrastination's face, lest it suggest
not loving you enough to do my best
to keep a promise I too lightly gave.
Thus *ship'n'bottle* glides from lists to lists,
a Flying Dutchman doomed to reappear
and haunt my paper seas, so though I clear
the decks, a ghostly sense of guilt persists.
Then let this sonnet exorcise my notes
and be the most preposterous of boats.

Music

Outward Bound by Tom Paxton (1937–)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IANs_tBsTuE

Based perhaps on my father's models and my own non-kit wooden model of a 74 gun ship of the line, Elizabeth asked a few years ago if I would make her a ship in a bottle and I said yes. Mea culpa, it remains undone. Shame on me. My father would have kept such a promise. All I have been able to offer is this sonnet, written on paper carefully inserted into a bottle I might have used. 'The wardenship' is the work of being a churchwarden and (for the avoidance of doubt...) the Antichrist was a moniker of the cat Merlin. His gaze was implacable and merciless.



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Christopher Whitby's website: www.chriswhitby.org.uk

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