

Short Analysis of William Bolcom's, "Who" from the song cycle, Briefly It Enters (1996)

John Vandevent

William Bolcom's intent in the setting of Kenyon's poetry was to "*clarify through music what the poem is about*," and this is evident in the portrayal of the journey of self-realization that Kenyon goes on through the textual depiction of self-awakening and a coming to terms of spiritual inspiration. One must consider the impact of this type of spiritually charged poetic writing, as around 1986 when the poem, 'Who' was published, America had just been introduced to the 'hippie' movement and the counterculture revolution which pushed the ideas of Eastern religion, specifically Hinduism, to the forefront of American's minds, thus providing a solid footing for the dive into the spiritual origins of man. Stated by Robert Wuthnow in his book, *"After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s,"*² that the 1960s not only brought a wave of 'spiritualism' to a mainstream American audience via Woodstock, rock n' roll, Hinduism, Hare Krishna Movement, but the destruction of the narrow concept of God. His phrase, "*nothing was sacred, but anything was possible*," establishes a belief that has remained poignant to anyone who hears it, that every possible route of life was now available to the American citizen. The barriers of religious institutions could, now in this age, called The Age of Kali³ in Hinduism, not keep anyone from living the life that they now choose. But what Wuthnow also points out, in conjunction with this indication of religious and secular freedom experienced by the ever-learning youth, was the disintegration of the idea of 'religion.' That the American idea of religion was no longer the leading institution of belief, this revelation opening the path to alternative paths of spiritual realization, paving the way for artists of all kinds to openly question the origin of the self and the role that one plays in the creation of thought and art. Spirituality, as delineated by George Santayana, philosopher, and author of books like, *'Interpretations of Poetry and Religion,'*⁴ can be thought in 6 bullet points, but the most important of the 6 is; *a belief in the immanence of the divine in nature and attunement to that presence*. Jane Kenyon heavily uses this theme, her muse being The Holy Spirit as stated by herself, and this idea of divinity bestowing its boons onto the poet is directly correlated to Robert Graves's notion of *The White Goddess*, where authentic poetry is only created by the honoring of the White Goddess, a three-fold female depiction of Mother Nature and the Primary Figurehead of pre-Patriarchal Mythologically dominated belief systems, celebrated and worshipped around the globe. The primary tenant of Robert Graves's philosophy answers the question, *'What is the use or function of poetry nowadays?'* The answer being, *"The function of poetry is religious invocations of the Muse,-"* and thus we continue with the analysis from this perspective as, not only was Bolcom dealing with the distressing death of Jane Kenyon in 1995, a year before the premiere of the full cycle, *'Briefly It Enters,'* but

¹ Jennings Jantsch,, Nancy E. "BRIEFLY IT ENTERS: A SONG CYCLE BY WILLIAM BOLCOM FROM POEMS BY JANE KENYON." *The Ohio State University* , 2001

² Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. University of California Press, 2005.

³ **Age of Kali:** An age where the spiritual is becoming rapidly destroyed and replaced with sensual desires and physical wants, "*the legs of religion retain only one fourth of their power, and even that will be lost with the progress of the age.*" More reading can be found here; "Page Info." CHAPTER THREE, vedabase.io/en/library/sb/12/3/.

⁴ Schmidt, Leigh E. "Spirituality in America." *Spirituality in America* | Wilson Quarterly, 2005, archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/spirituality-in-america.

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compounded upon this realization was the equally tragic death of Tatiana Troyanos in 1993 suddenly from cancer. Consequently, William Bolcom must have had the concept of divinity and impermanence on his mind, and it comes across quite plainly in the feeling of displacement observed in this short two page 'art song'. On the topic of ephemerality, William Bolcom had expressed to Kenyon, via letter, his want to acquire the poem, "Schubertitis" in Bolcom's efforts to make a *twentieth-century Winterreise*,⁵ and parallels have been drawn between the first song of *Dichterliebe* to the beginning of *Who*, although the similarities only rely on minimal comparisons, and thus I am inclined not to correlate the two. Jane Kenyon's 'hunger' for her poetic words came from her 'spirit,' and through the analysis of her text in tandem with Bolcom's dynamic yet sensitive approach to fully expressing her divine inspirations, Kenyon's essence can be felt through her textual approach to the notation of the Goddess's energy, her inner Holy Spirit. The investigation into this short text proves to be a fruitful endeavor due to intricate layers that Jane Kenyon ponders on the whereabouts of her poetic inspirations. Opening the poem, Kenyon writes the lines, *"These lines written by an animal, an angel, a stranger sitting in my chair;-"* thus inferring the point of a three-tiered existence wrapped up into one, fallible creation called the stranger. Kenyon's portrayal of the human experience as of one an animalistic fight for survival countered with an intrinsic unification of spirit leads one to the ponderer to question the motivations behind this explicit delineation of self. Commentary provided by Ashok Karra points to the disassociation of one's identity as a loss of the self, a misunderstanding of 'who' the true-self is, this question provides ample support to the very title of the poem. Who is it that is speaking, am I able to correctly identify who is coming to sit in this chair before me, is it a being of an origin of animal, angel, or man?

Conceptually we understand what is being pointed to. However, philosophically it is a complex opening to a poem, this line now skewing the identity of the speaker to the reader, which forces the reader to ponder the notion that the one voicing their thoughts doesn't own their thoughts at all. Instead, they are being given or allowed to flow into the figurehead who is merely reciting these words. Kenyon follows the semi-colon with, *"by someone who already knows how to live without trouble among books, and pots and pan,"* perhaps alluding to the stranger finding a seat in the chair as fundamentally foreign, birthed from a celestial origin. 'They' find refuge among the information bestowed to them through books and has gained the ability to grapple with the heavenly abode of infinite knowledge and the mundane, limited world in which one must become acclimated with the drudgery of life, i.e., cooking, cleaning, emotions, setbacks. Even in the second line, Kenyon utilizes the disparities between the self and the other 'higher' version, thinking that they are seemingly different from each other, unable to mix or be conjoined. A flawed man who has lost touch with the exact origin of his essence and the divine body, who has mastered both the material and the heavenly abode, and this desire to unify one's self with that higher version is

⁵ "William Bolcom, letter to Jane Kenyon, 25 June 1994. Jane Kenyon Papers, University of New Hampshire Lib., Durham, N.H. (Sourced from 1.)

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ultimately Kenyon's desire. However, also the known (or unknown) desire of all members of the human race, and this desire leads us to actions and thoughts that seemingly contradict this noblest appetite. Following these two lines setting the dilemma in which we find our speaker, Kenyon continues, *"Who is it who asks me to find language for this sound-."* Kenyon begins an essential question regarding the whereabouts of the inception of her thought. At the same time, simultaneously acknowledging that her contemplations, both of the artistic and mundane, stem from *something* not of her fruition but of a distinctly 'heavenly' nature which inspires her to conceive the name for a sound in this example, what is that sound that inspires such a thought, *"- a sheep's hoof makes when it strikes a stone?"* A sheep striking a stone alluded to by Ashok Karra⁶ is the incompatibility of the sheep for the stone, but I disagree that this is being used as an allusion for a place where the consciousness should not be. Instead, the sheep has used a pictorial representation of the mind's aloofness and its inability to delineate between grass and stone, and through the identification of the hoof's sound against the stone the speaker and those inquisitive about hearing and identifying 'that' sound are given divine knowledge, i.e., divine inspiration, mania, the Platonic concept of the 4 inspirations given by certain God and Goddess's in the Greek Pantheon. Jane Kenyon's inspiration might lie more in the Catholic interpretation of God as, like aforementioned, her source of poetic impetus stemmed from the Holy Spirit, a concept utilized in Catholicism and different sects of Christianity. However, in more Eastern religions, this idea is not used at all.

Be that as it may, the message given by these three lines can be understood as someone who understands that their thoughts, their identity, their sense of rooted self is not entirely theirs. Instead of becoming fortified in their disillusionment, they seek out the truth, questioning their thoughts and motivations behind the very inquisition of naming a sound, a triviality, a seemingly small task for the complicated human mind to take time to dwell on. Kenyon then poses one final question, the central question of the entire poem, *"And who speaks the words which are my food?"* As if all that was pondered before has fallen away, revealing the truth of the structural foundation of Jane Kenyon's poetic philosophy, we are introduced to this great question of originalities' real source. By the mere asking of the question, the speaker understands the finality of mortal thought and rather than be absorbed into the physical world, the race to keep and capture 'it,' they instead humbly ask God, the Divine, Krishna, where do these thoughts come from, who births these ideas in my head for which I can utilize and decipher into emotions, thoughts, feelings, poems? Kenyon's food, her poetic noticings of the natural world and our place in the grand plan are supplied only by God, in her case, The Holy Spirit, and this theme of a renewal of self, a re-establishing of the authenticity of the true spirit within ourselves is remarkably clear in this short poem. Jane Kenyon had remarked to her Pastor before her passing in 1995, *"Over the years my poetry changed to reflect my awakening. Life changed profoundly. I began to be grateful for*

⁶ Karra, Ashok. "Jane Kenyon, 'Who.'" *Rethink.*, 12 Nov. 2014, www.ashokkarra.com/2014/11/jane-kenyon-who/.

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things that I had always taken for granted."⁷ Indeed, this sentiment is a common occurrence in us all, although many of us don't become in tune with our 'awakening' until it's too late. For Kenyon, she recognized the need for a refinement in the way she interacted with herself, her talent, and her relation to the natural world both physically and mentally. Documented by Mike Pride in his journal, "The Abiding Presence of Jane Kenyon" was an experience he had in 1996 when he had walked into her home writing office, in utterly pristine condition, left by her husband untouched. On the wall was a hand-stitched 'sampler'/ a small rendition of an extensive textile work that read *You're going to live*. After her passing, this memento made by a close friend of her's made him uncomfortable, and so, departing its original spot in the bedroom, he had moved it to the study out of his way due to emotional sentiments. But what I stop and think about is how this would have touched her, this battle cry of faith to keep going despite the inevitable beckoning the mind to dwell in its abode. She had so much to say that she didn't succumb mentally to the anguish of cancer, and so she did live; she is living now. Every time we read her poetry, dwell on her impact, we experience her impact and the efforts she put forward to changing the perspective of the minds on our relationship both of this world and the next. She had said herself, after publishing the poem, "Let Evening Come, *"I need to be working on a kind of frontier where I don't know myself what's going to happen next,"* proving to lovers and first-time readers alike that she sought real knowledge, the kind that brings awakenings, realizations of self, and because of her intellectual and spiritual hunger, she did live. She lived more than most of us have in our life up until the day you're reading this, she concretely understood the meaning of life, her poetic start of writing columns showed her the truth of what it means to be human, *"You go for the concrete, avoid the abstract. The purpose of the enterprise (community column writing) is to draw out what matters in life: change, loss, love, hope, humanity."* Whether you agree or not, there is no denying that she brought a level of sheer humanity to her poetry, devoid of politics, anti-this, anti-that, pro-this, pro-that. She was pro-authenticity, she understood Mother Nature and in return, she will live, she is living and she will not die. This question of who is speaking through us is mirrored in all religions and spiritual paths, from Hinduism to Christianity, to the Jewish faith and further to Islam. These paths to a stark awakening encompass the same principles; supplication to the Divine, authenticity of self, the acknowledgment that all is from God and through us, the Divine is active. Kenyon served as the channel for the Divine, and she must of have felt that it was her duty to give back to Society that which she was given, the truth of how to consciously live in harmony with all. When it comes to the musical setting of *Who*, William Bolcom indeed decided to encapsulate the tumultuousness of the identification of self, evident in his usage of dark tonalities, compounded chords, and supposedly 'stately' motivic repetition.

The short two-page piece is structured in a ternary format, the first depiction of the A section concluding at the sustained $g^{\dim7+9}$, called this for simplification purposes as the only

⁷ Pride, Mike. "The Abiding Presence of Jane Kenyon." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 113, no. 3, 2005, pp. 458–462. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27549711. Accessed 10 Apr. 2020.

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outlying note is the ab which I called the 9th due to information regarding the actual usage of a^b being unclear in the later part of measure 12 into 13. However, at the beginning of measure 12, one could vertically identify the first chord as a B^{b7} if one neglects the arpeggio in the LH piano. The B section continues from measure 13 and goes until the conclusionary measure of the sustained a⁷ moving to an a^{#dim7} in the LH piano with a C^{M7} minus the 5th overtone. This cluster of 7th chords in measure 15-16 give the impression of a pseudo-jazz sensation, stemming from the creation of an a^{7(9-8sus)}, and a distinctly augmented sensation because of the use of the augmented scale with its stacked diminished chords; cdim and e^{b/d#dim}, most notable in works like Schoenberg, Babbitt, Bartok, all styles of composition on display by Bolcom. Rerouting and returning to the A section part 1, the previously stated e^{dim7} over chromatic movement with a sustained M2 at its conclusion, part 2 of the returning A section being instead of the previously stated c^{#m7+9}, it turns to Major, although that is the only noticeable difference except for a small chromatic upper-motion passage of three notes while the final chord, I'm reading it as a franken C^{7+4(6-5sus)}, carries forth for 3 measures culminating in a fermata. Thus, Bolcom uses the form as a communication tool, summoning chordal motifs up to the front-lines when he chooses to emote specific characteristics of the text, i.e., the opening e^{dim7} motif coming in before the text which references the differentiation of self pictured in the tenuous meanderings of the RH of the pianist, sitting in my chair being depicted as 'flushed out' chords, the cascading 7th passage convening with the text about the inference of the origin of a sound's name. All this points to the fact that Bolcom was writing his music, not for the strictly harmonic flow of the theoretical phrase, but for the characterization of the textual 'movie' being played out, composing scene by scene as to authenticate the experience that Jane Kenyon had through her poem and immerse us in her world, even if it's just for 1:41 seconds. Upon listening to this piece once over after noticing the melodic patterns utilized by Bolcom, the tinkling of the upper register of the piano, in the beginning, starts to take on the traits of an out of tune music box furthering that every so distant sensation of childhood, honest innocence and the time when our connection to our true-self was the strongest. This sense of childlike 'tinkling' is furthered by the tempo marking, *Moderately slow*, providing the pianist ample time to relish in the rolling of the diminished chord and letting each semi-tone and dissonant interval have its time to amalgamize into the sounds of the upper piano fully. Pointed out by Nancy E. Jennings Jantsch in her in-depth study of *Briefly It Enters*, was Bolcom's affinity for open textures, which in his understanding signified spirituality. This is evidenced in measure 10-13, where the arpeggiated chords are given ample room to breath, and the chromatic accompaniment is written in a way to solidify the realization of 'space' through the octave F# which then breaks into a chromatic climb before reaching the apex of the phrase in measure 13. The openness of the musical texture is a constant throughout this piece, as the musical make-up is one built on repetition, although in the B section the downward motion of the 7ths makes the bulk of the outlying closed compositional structure, but this passage when heard accompanying the text, "Who is it who asks me to find language for the sound," doesn't feel out of place or inappropriately complex, rather the continuous nature of the vocal line and piano lends itself to a feeling of 'rightness,' lying in

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the top of the RH piano there being a pseudo-melody; A, F#, Ab, A, and because of Bolcom's use of repetition during these 4 measures a sense of lulling takes one, a rocking motion not induced solely by the 4 note oscillations but due to the 7th chord repetition as well; -f^{#dim7}-a^{dim7}-g^{dim7}, feeding into a downward chromatic pattern of 7ths; g, f, e, d, c#, b, a, taking an upwards turn to a# in measure 19. This chromatic 'scale' makes up the components of an AM scale with that of a Aeolian, which produces a lowered 6 and 7, yet a raised 3rd. One may not hear the scalar model that I am responding to. However, I would advise one to consider how Bolcom uses jazz theory as well as Schoenberg styles of extended tonality through the rest of his pieces and especially in Volume 1 Song 1 of his Cabaret Pieces⁸, where the texture takes on much more Ives and Schoenberg than 'traditional' Bolcom, therefore, I believe it plausible that in this passage he was deliberately thinking about the scalar model to build his proceeding chordal accompaniment upon.

One final noticing worth mentioning is indicated by Nancy Jantsch, Bolcom's way of exercising poetic authenticity to his writing concerning the 'placement of the final consonants.' He highlights hard consonants and allows the development of words, i.e., pans, trouble with the stressed second syllable, knows, someone, find.⁹ His clear understanding of the spoken way of words is articulated and demonstrated with the prosodic setting of text fitting perfectly with the natural leans and whilts of the spoken English poem. Because of this, when listening to the piece, even the most vocally 'challenging' areas sound naturally placed in the voice, although singing a B5 piano for 4 beats is hardly considered natural, however beautiful it may be. Even the triplets on 'are it who' and 'for the' don't feel disjunct and, instead, articulate a pattern that may or may not be already natural to the speech patterns we already partake in. This leads me to consider this piece, with all of its vocal obstacles and technical skill requirements, utterly singable. At no point in this piece do interval or vowels not coalesce to allow the singer, who is vocally prepared and able, from singing a healthy sound full of artistic representation. *Who* doesn't just represent the spiritual explorer, or the questioner who embarks on the quest to find who the truth that speaks through them is? Kenyon's poem signifies a more profound, contextual understanding of what it means to be a simple human being lost within the world's multi-layered fabric, unable to decipher self from the myriad of stimuli telling you who you are and what to think. Jane Kenyon's battle for self-realization mirrored her battle for health; she never once looked back, never once stopped battling the onslaught of negativity and degradation fo self that one could choose as an alternative path when facing all that she had to deal with in the latter part of her life. Her poem, *Otherwise*, written and compiled in her 1996 volume of the same name, '*Otherwise, New and Selected Poems*'¹⁰ portrays the

⁸ The piece I am referencing is Over the Piano; "Cabaret Songs (Complete)." Atom, williambolcom.com/blogs/recent-releases/posts/cabaret-songs-complete.

⁹ Also utilized and shown musically is Kenyon's use of '*enjambment*,' meaning the result of when one line feeds into the next thus having a very continuous sensation to the lines of poetry. This concept is talked about in Source 1, but more can be read about it here; "Enjambment - Definition and Examples of Enjambment." Literary Devices, 14 July 2017, literarydevices.net/enjambment/.

¹⁰ Available for official means of purchase at GrayWolf Press; Kenyon, Jane. "Otherwise." *Otherwise* | Graywolf Press, www.graywolfpress.org/books/otherwise.

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very sentiment of *Who*, a longing to teach society how to alter the mindset of me to us, although in *Otherwise*, written within the last days of her life, she seeks to the point that for which we take granted and do not any longer consider a blessing, i.e., getting up out of bed with two strong legs, eating a peach, laying in bed with a loved one, walking the dog. Although there are differences, the fact that she met this health challenge with such posterity and bravery is something to be admired continuously, and in the face of not being able to type she continued to be that beaming soul of light she always was, neither giving in to the fate she must endure or the darkness that had the possibility of encasing her. William Bolcom picks up on that in *Who*, never once making the dissonance and tonal ambiguity seem a drudgery or a laborious process, both for the player and singer. Instead, he engages the listener with an active synergy of emotional urgency, the need to say something, to reach out to someone, to ask the question, where am I going, where do I come from, what do I do now that I am lost? But she wasn't lost and nor is Bolcom, both the text and the music feel extremely secure in where their respective destination lie, one being in a question and one being in obscurity, the ending of the 1st song of *Briefly It Enters* not providing the listener with a solid cadence to 'stop' on. Another tenant of spiritualism, defined by George Santayana, is; *a yearning for mystical experience, or epiphanic awareness* (an eye-opening experience, the awakening of self-awareness, the opening of your 'third eye')¹¹. One then could consider Jane Kenyon to be enlightened, as she was deeply intuned with the 'reality' of life here on Earth and instead of giving in to the temptations and sadness that ensues when one is forced to give up all that was acquired in life, she understood the authentic soul, the real reason we were put here. To give to others, to be kind, to be humble, and to teach. That is why William Bolcom and Jane Kenyon match so well together, but there are a deep understanding and respect on the part of Bolcom for these texts that are so deeply ingrained to the very soul of Kenyon, that to not read between the lines and discover the revelations that Kenyon found would be doing injustice to the poem and Kenyon's poetic legacy. I highly recommend anyone interested in learning about what it means to be human to read Jane Kenyon's poetry. Live life like it's your last.

¹¹ Used by James Joyce for his concept of stream of consciousness. More reading; Tondello, A. James Joyce and the Epiphanic Inscription: Towards an Art of Gesture as Rhythm. *Humanities* 2018, 7, 109.

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