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Speaking the Overfull World:
A Close Reading of Bruce McRae's Poem "All In"



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SPEAKING 'THE OVERFULL WORLD: *A Close Reading of Bruce McRae's Poem "All In"*

Bruce McRae's "All In" stages a poetics of radical inclusiveness, attempting to apprehend a universe so populous, heterogeneous, and excessive that it resists any definitive act of representation. At the level of literal statement, the poem assembles an expansive catalogue of beings, objects, events, and abstractions, all subsumed within a single order of existence. Its lexicon—terms such as *animalcules*, *justian badinage*, *cosmophobia*, and *simony*—thickens the verbal texture of the poem's world, lending it an atmosphere at once erudite, eccentric, and unruly. The title, *All In*, announces this totalizing impulse from the outset: the poem admits no principle of exclusion, incorporating the sublime and the sordid, the cosmic and the quotidian, the sacred and the grotesque. Although it offers no stable physical setting, it constructs a metaphysical field in which biological life, social disorder, violence, theology, and imaginative projection coexist. The speaker initially appears to occupy a position of contemplative survey, but the poem gradually reveals his implication in the very plenitude he describes. That movement is crucial, for the poem is concerned not merely with the scale of existence but with the limits of language and consciousness before such scale.

The poem articulates this epistemological pressure through its formal procedures as much as through its explicit assertions. Written in irregular free verse, "All In" rejects fixed rhyme and stable metrical pattern, thereby refusing the kinds of formal containment that might imply an ordered, hierarchized reality. Instead, McRae relies heavily on enjambment, allowing syntactic units to outrun the line and thus dramatize the poem's resistance to closure. In the opening movement—"The great chain of being includes / the soul of the fly and American oligarch"—the line break produces a momentary suspension before the phrase expands outward into an

improbable conjunction. Such continuities generate momentum, but McRae counterbalances them with fragments, abrupt declarative units, and accumulative list structures, so that the poem oscillates between propulsion and interruption. The stanzas themselves vary in length, creating provisional pauses rather than stable divisions. Formally, then, the poem does not merely describe boundlessness; it performs it, translating ontological excess into a reading experience structured by expansion, discontinuity, and recurrent overflow.

McRae's diction intensifies that formal restlessness through a sustained collision of linguistic registers. Elevated philosophical phrasing such as "the great chain of being" is set beside starkly material or abject details—"a drunk in a ditch," "some bloodied rag to chew"—so that the poem repeatedly collapses conventional distinctions between metaphysical speculation and bodily contingency. The vocabulary ranges from Latinate abstraction, as in "indecipherable," "disillusionment," and "hypothetical," to monosyllabic, tactile nouns such as "bones," "rag," "snow," and "thorns." This lexical heterogeneity is not ornamental; it enacts the poem's refusal to privilege one mode of being over another. Its syntax reinforces the same principle. Much of the poem proceeds paratactically, through the juxtaposition of phrases and clauses without extensive subordination or explanatory linkage, so that meaning emerges through adjacency rather than linear exposition. The catalogue becomes, in this sense, both a compositional strategy and a philosophical claim. Even the line "To wobble is human, to stumble divine" exemplifies the poem's practice of estranging inherited formulas: by recasting the cadence of a familiar maxim into a more unstable proposition, McRae foregrounds disorder as a constitutive feature of existence. The poem does not argue discursively for interconnectedness; it produces that interconnectedness as an effect of syntax, sequence, and verbal pressure.

The poem's figurative and imagistic field further elaborates this vision of total imbrication. Its governing trope, the "great chain of being," invokes a classical cosmological model predicated on hierarchy and order; yet McRae radically revises that model by filling it with jarring, anti-hierarchical juxtapositions: "the soul of the fly

and American oligarch," "chicken bones and all-seeing eye," "operas and atrocities." The effect is less that of a stable chain than of a proliferating assemblage in which disparate ontological categories are forced into contiguity. Personification is central to this process. "Death is sewing its pretty party dress" domesticates and aestheticizes mortality without diminishing its force, while "light and water inventing the pear tree" recasts natural process as imaginative production. Such moments blur distinctions between the literal and the allegorical, the material and the animate. The sensory register of the poem is equally dense: "black thunder," "a bowl of fruit," "a red rocket landing / in the snow," "dancing bears," and "thistles and thorns" produce a sequence of sharply etched images whose rapid succession prevents any settled tonal orientation. Beauty, violence, wonder, and grotesquerie coexist without synthesis. As a result, the poem's imagery does not stabilize meaning but proliferates it, rendering existence as sensorially saturated and affectively unstable.

Sound provides one of the principal means by which the poem secures coherence without sacrificing heterogeneity. McRae's catalogues are not random accumulations but acoustically patterned sequences governed by repetition, echo, and cadence. Alliterative clusters such as "bloodied rag," "brief interludes," and "thistles and thorns" create local sonic bindings, while broader patterns of assonance and consonance confer a surprising musicality even on apparently incongruous combinations such as "jazz fusion and cosmophobia" or "Mule trains, cat flaps, boxcars, angels." Although the poem does not submit to a regular meter, it develops a strongly marked rhythmic logic through iterative syntactic structures. Repeated openings—"There's always..." "I could..."—function almost as anaphoric pulses, generating a litany-like movement that gathers force across the poem's later stanzas. This cumulative rhythm culminates self-reflexively in "the symphony's blinding crescendo," a phrase that names the very sonic enlargement the poem has been enacting. In this respect, sound is not merely decorative but structural: it is the medium through which multiplicity becomes temporarily apprehensible as pattern.

The poem's decisive turn occurs when the speaker moves from catalogic observation to explicit implication: "Of course I'm in on it." Up to this point, the voice has appeared to survey the world's proliferating contents from a position of fascinated, if increasingly

strained, spectatorship. With this admission, however, the speaker acknowledges his participation in the very processes of inclusion, violence, and becoming that he has been enumerating. The final movement intensifies that shift by converting the desire to name the world into a recognition of representational insufficiency. Even if the speaker could write "every atom on Earth" and describe "each molecule," he would still fail to "contain you." The concluding pronoun is deliberately expansive, at once intimate and cosmological, suggesting that neither the beloved, nor the world, nor being itself can be fully encompassed by language. McRae's central claim, then, is not simply that existence is radically inclusive, but that such inclusiveness exceeds the capacities of taxonomy, lyric utterance, and human cognition. Through free verse, enjambed catalogue, lexical heterogeneity, personification, and accumulative sonic patterning, "All In" reimagines the great chain of being not as a legible hierarchy but as a modern condition of overwhelming interconnectedness. Its achievement lies in making formal excess itself the vehicle of thought: the poem knows the world precisely by demonstrating that it cannot finally contain it.

ABOUT BRUCE MCRAE:

BRUCE MCRAE, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and *North American Review*. The winner of the 2020 Libretto prize and author of four poetry collections and seven chapbooks, his poems have been broadcast and performed globally.

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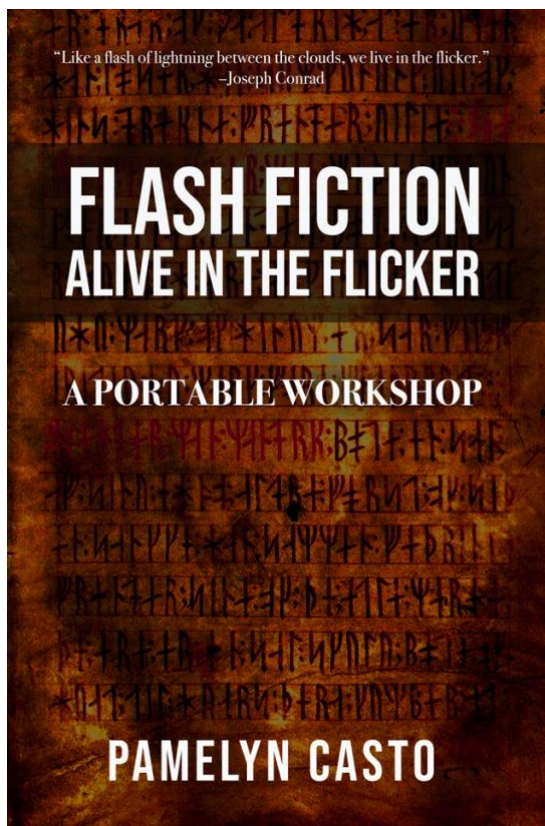
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