

## Poems from “Holding it All,” by Bernice Mennis

### The Passageway

At what age does baby turn into boy and boy turn man?  
I look at the children huddled together,  
clutching their mother’s skirt,  
an empty bowl, a small possibility of rain, mother and child hiding  
from men strutting,  
guns slung on shoulder,  
walking through the streets  
emptied by fear,  
young boys hiding who, in a few days or years,  
will become those feared men.

What happens to that sweet and fearful boy  
still bonded to mother and sister?  
What ocean had he to swim  
to get to this strange land  
where nothing is familiar,  
no one family, nothing sacred?  
How does he turn into that man?

And is there  
any way  
for him  
to return  
to the motherland?

### On the Theme of Exile

Each weary and abandoned cat who wends its way  
to our window in the winter cold just wants shelter and food.  
The last, Pumpkin Shalom, no different from the others.

But those who have come before do not welcome this new one.,  
though I admonish with words from the Holy Book  
to remember that they too were once strangers in a strange land,  
exiles forlorn and hungry, seeking simple shelter,  
the refrain repeated again and again in the Old Testament.  
Someone clearly thought it important.

But still they fight, their own past now invisible in present luxury.  
They do not want to hear the pain of the new wanderers.

In the news I see pictures of women  
wrapped in brightly colored dresses  
to which their small children cling  
under the weight of all their lives.  
they are fleeing from what was home  
to what is not yet known.  
A simple hope of safety an open door.

And isn’t that true for all of us?

Yesterday it was the people of Sudan, Liberia, Zimbabwe,  
and before that the Congo, three million dead,  
and millions of refugees, Rwanda, Angola, Barundii . . .  
Nowhere safe.

And before that the Palestinians, now, still,  
and before that the Jews, and before that the Jews,  
not so long ago.

(continued from previous paragraph)

What happens to memory?  
How can what is so visceral  
not touch us, our heart to another’s heart,  
the feeling of cold and hunger,  
the heavy bags, the fear, the fist, the hatred of the other,  
the stranger who was ourselves,  
who is ourselves?

### And More Questions

What are they fighting for,  
fighting over,  
those men  
with guns  
while women,  
gather water,  
plant fields,  
cook food  
to feed the children,  
some of whom will become  
the men with guns  
who will destroy home and field.

Last night I saw men  
with other instruments,  
cellos, violins, French horns, oboes, flues  
playing with love and joy.

And of course it would be insane  
for the cello to take up arms against the flute,  
the viola to destroy the clarinet,  
he piano to silence the violin playing so softly.

Instruments of war,  
instruments of beauty,  
what we carry, what we do with our arms  
and hearts.

### Call it the Ice Pond

Call it the ice pond  
of the heart.  
Call it skimming the surface tentatively,  
Call it fear or pain or powerlessness.  
Call it not being able to touch any creature  
swimming below the surface,  
familiar or strange.  
Call it almost not remembering the summer  
of movement - the beaver’s silver motion,  
the frog’s surprising spring, the graceful sway of grass  
Call it cold and distant.

In winter fishermen sit for hours on the frozen ice  
before the small dark circle carved by their own hands.  
They wait for the pull of the line.

These words are like that thin line dangling into the waters below  
waiting for something to tug at my heart.

## I Look for Signs

I look for signs of life.

The tiny red maple leaves suddenly appear on two branches,  
the rose vine cascades under the wood pile,  
the azalea spurts small green leaves.  
I find Tania's cup and broken plate, buried in ash,  
the crushed metal merry-go-round,  
paintings and sketches, torn, parts missing,  
almost beautiful in their new forms.

I handle each piece reverently,  
place them delicately on the earth,  
as if they are the treasure they are,  
this small remnant, even the porcelain fragments  
almost unrecognizable,  
the warped and twisted metal,  
and me seeing anew, defining again,  
what is precious, what is life.

This morning I breathed sweetness  
and didn't smell ash.

After the fire I knew our loss could be comprehended,  
was not measureless, like mountains, rivers,  
aquifers, springs,  
like air and earth.

## Nature's Fragments

And aren't we all gleaners on this earth  
looking for fallen fruit left on the ground  
when we are hungry,  
or a lit house in the distance  
when we are lost,  
or a fire  
when we are cold?

If the river is wide enough  
jetsam and debris float in light and waves  
making swirls of color.  
Hard to name what is beautiful or ugly.

If I allowed this stillness to move more slowly  
I could go into the disappearing landscape of myself.  
One yellow leaf lands on my drawing pad  
and a few grace my shoulder.  
If I lay still on the earth, my body would make a print.  
It would be called the place where no leaves fall.

A butterfly moves in the wind like a yellow leaf staying afloat  
That's me there, afloat and flying,  
silently singing the song of unknown birds.

When you first enter paradise move slowly.  
You have never been here before.  
You may never come again.

(continued from previous paragraph)

To meditate this is what you need to do:  
Every morning  
do nothing again and again

I finally got there today be going nowhere very slowly.

## Song, Remembered From a Long Ago Vision

I am the doer  
I am the giver  
I am the earth  
I can receive.

I am the sunlight on the mountains  
I am the shadow under the trees.

I am the bird that's in that sunshine  
I am the snake that's in that shade  
I am the bird that sings so softly  
I am the snake that moves so still.

I am the wind whose music dances  
I am the earth that makes no sound  
I am the sound that turns to silence  
I am the silence that can be heard.

I am the roots that go deep under  
I am the boughs that sway so high  
I am the old one who seems too foolish  
I am the child who seems so wise.

Sometimes I know my life's a circle  
always flowing returning home  
but something I feel I have no center  
I am a sport lost and alone.

Then I go to my own mother  
touch her earth and breathe her air  
drink her water, see her bounty,  
and I know my heart is there.

And I know my home is there.

## Poems from “ **Holding it All,**” by Bernice Mennis

### **A Faith I Live By**

Not the second coming, this is a rapture from the earth.  
It is a faith I believe in because I know  
what it means to be lifted by beauty,  
above the tall pines, their needles glistening with morning light.

This is a faith I believe in because I know  
the shadow of darkness moving under the white light of ice.  
Above, the tall pines, their needles glistening with morning light.  
High and low reflected here, no way to separate heaven from earth.

The shadow of darkness moves under the white light of ice,  
its edge like fine lace from the old country.  
High and low reflected here, no way to separate heaven from earth.  
The rapture to be wrapped in a cocoon of love  
transported into darkness.

The thin edges like fine lace from the old country,  
not a second coming, this is a rapture from the earth.  
The rapture to be wrapped in a cocoon of love  
transported into darkness.

What it means to be lifted by beauty,  
this is a faith I live by everyday.

### **Playing the Piano, After a Long Absence**

The thought came when I lost the G.  
An important note. I would, of course, press down on the key  
whenever I read it on the music sheet,  
forgetting that it was dead, expecting a response,  
For awhile I didn't really miss the G,  
could hear the anticipated sound  
hanging in the air and in my mind's ear.  
When the lower D went I felt bad  
but reconciled myself with he thought that the B flat  
was more important in most pieces I loved,  
which was true, except that then it, too, went.  
Losses are not contained, they continue.  
Soon whole sections of music stood silent  
though my fingers continued to press  
the flattened unresponsive keys.

I would occasionally remember the weaker notes  
and press a hard and heavy finger down on delicate white.  
Sometimes i would sound. But in the gesture  
what was sweet and soft was lost,  
and in the waiting for the note to slowly rise,  
rhythm and spirit sunk a bit. Still there was enough.

Today, in this hot and humid summer,  
it's even worse. More notes lie fallen.  
I picture a battlefield. It's just loss, I think,  
and wonder how much of any life can be lost with spirit  
staying intact. At what point, I questioned,  
while playing a diminished Pachelbel,  
do we despair and stop playing?  
How much imagination can fill how much empty space?

I continued to play and thought of Beethoven,  
stone deaf and still he could hear music within his mind's ear,  
could create whole symphonies. It's clearly possible.

That's the key, I thought, still playing and coming  
to a particularly beautiful section where everything seemed  
suddenly whole. To hear the deeper notes that still resound  
within us, no matter how much is lost.

And the more I played, the more limber my slow fingers.  
The G actually returned.

I thought of my travel cross country with my first tape recorder,  
my companion unable to hear through the muffled sounds.  
But on that whole long trip,  
I sang along with Emmy Lou and Janis, Joan and Dylan.

What can I say? I knew the music and I was happy.

## The Lake at Early Dawn

In the early dawn  
I row toward the rising sun  
to reach the remaining mist  
at the far end of the pond  
before warm touches cold  
and mystery disappears  
into water.

From the corner of my eye  
I see the loons for whom I have searched.  
Have them been created through my longing,  
a mirage disappearing when I turn my boat?  
They slip under water  
and quietly disappear  
with no trace.

I move toward dark figures at the far end  
who become, as I approach,  
what they always were: rock on top of rock.

Suddenly two loons appear by my side,  
their dark black heads,  
their patterned intensity of black and white.  
One begins to rise, a ballerina,  
with webbed toes touching water,  
wings outstretched into air,  
she of both air and water.

Their cry of longing in the air,  
like my gaze into the distant mist,  
disappears and comes again, and again.

I row far out to see the mountain  
I know is there and take comfort  
in what is unchanged.  
I think of the one I love,  
wishing her here, by these waters,  
hearing the sound of loon,  
seeing the mountain  
lit by the rising sun.

And I think of my sister,  
no longer here on earth,  
how she loved birds, in nest or flight,  
and loved the sea.  
I see her swimming  
her small strong body  
moving beyond my vision,

I know our beloveds are immortal  
in heart and memory,  
but today I feel their presence  
in all they have loved,  
how each time we who still walk this earth  
and swim these waters see what was loved  
we remember the one who loved,  
a mystery within and beyond our reaching.

## Leaves and Thoughts

The golden leaf, falling from the tree  
now curling through the air  
now landing in the stream and moving on the waters,  
will never return to that branch  
cutting across the sky.

Golden birds shake off their wet wings.  
where the leaf has fallen, the pulsating bud.

Clear raindrops like red berries  
hang from thin brown tendrils  
float in air  
drop to the ground.

Everything outside me burst a seed within.  
Last night the dark heron silently moving overhead  
split into the fiery pink sky that had been gray black for days  
and me thinking all birds had already flown south,  
and me, now, moving south on the highway.

The pampas grass gray fire, like chimney smoke rising  
in front of a glorious dawn, El Greco's steel gray,  
shimmering in light, and those two hawks overhead are,  
I swear, dancing to Ackerman's guitar.  
They must be hearing the same music  
moving through my ears.  
And now the grass is vibrating with Kitaro's deep sax,  
and the blackbirds - ten, thirty - float  
like black leaves in the blue blue sky.

Radiant, moving like the geese,  
nothing, everything, will be lost.