My hymn writing is essentially word-watching. Words are like shy forest creatures: they often seem more willing to come into view if they do not think they are being sought. Thus, when I began working on this hymn, I sent a question (“Why do we sing in worship?”) into the thickets of my unconscious and settled in to wait.

While waiting, I took a cup of morning coffee out to my back porch, picked up a volume of short stories, and began to read. A few pages into a story, a line of hymn text began appearing at the edges of consciousness: “When hearts filled full cannot contain....” Quietly, so as not to startle the words, I reached for pen and paper and began to write. The line rounded itself out into a complete stanza. Looking at the result, I realized I had been given a metric pattern (8.8.4.4.4.), a rhyme scheme (AABBC), and an outline (four lines stating a reason for singing and the repeating refrain: “We sing”). Unthinkingly, I had mirrored form and content; normally, each line of hymn text is a self-contained unit, so that meaning will not get distorted when singers inevitably take a breath between musical phrases. Yet, I had violated this “rule,” letting full hearts not be “contained” within their eight-syllable unit, but “burst their bounds” (“breathlessly,” at that!) to flow over into subsequent lines. I decided I was happy with the transgression.

Other stanzas followed as I filled in the given pattern with further reasons to sing: to lament injustice, repent wrongdoing, remember the past, rekindle poetic visions, and join with the saints who rejoice before the throne of God (Revelation 4:10-11). Jane Marshall agreed to set the text to music, and her sensitive rendering lets the rustling words take wing.

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We Sing!

BY MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

When hearts filled full cannot contain
their breathless joy, but swell and strain
to burst their bounds
in laughing sounds:
   We sing. We sing!

When suffering calls us to lament
the wrongs we witness and repent
the hurts we cause,
in tearful voice:
   We sing. We sing!

When cherished mem’ries bind us fast
to saints who lived in days long past,
to tend and save
the gifts they gave:
   We sing. We sing!

When poets craft with loving care
the dreams and visions that we share,
and words inspire
with tongues of fire:
   We sing. We sing!

When dust ensouled by Spirit’s breath
is resurrected after death,
before the throne
with all God’s own:
   We sing. We sing!

We Sing!

MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

1. When hearts filled full cannot contain their
   breathless joy, but swell and strain to
   burst their bounds in laughing sounds:
   hurts we cause, in tearful voice:

2. When suffering calls us to lament the
   wrongs we witness and repent the
   hurts we cause, in tearful voice:

3. When cherished memories bind us fast to
   dreams and visions that we share, and
   tend and save the gifts they gave:

4. When poets craft with loving care the
   resurrections after death, be-
   words in inspire with tongues of fire:

5. When dust en-souled by Spirit's breath is
  fore the throne with all God's own:
We sing, We sing!
(We sing, We sing!)