

LIFE'S JOURNEY



George W. Jones
Collected Essays and Poems

Edited by Dan Hardison

The Cathedral

The love of God
constrains His child
to conceive that the mountains
have walled Sherwood
into a vast cathedral
with the arch of the firmament
its dome.

The mountain
squarely west
becomes the high altar
of the cathedral.

The trees
holding half their leaves
are bright red gold,
the corn is ruddy gold,
and the warm light
filtered through autumn haze
is pale glowing gold.

Fallen leaves
carpeting the temple
and raked into a hundred mounds
by a hundred thurifers
make incense.

And the smoke rises thick
before the mighty altar
and dims the great cathedral
as it climbs, spirals, weaves
upward and upward
into the celestial dome.

The earth smells of ripeness –
ripe harvest,
ripe apples,
ripe fodder –
spicy and sweet.

The last warmth
of the aging year
is tenderly caressing.

The day is breathless.
There is neither speech
nor language
but nature is very clear,
“Be still. Know God
in the work of His hands.”

The sinking sun all day long
veiled by golden haze
at last becomes visible,
then portentous,
as the huge disk
above the mountain altar
sinks lower, lower
to the altar throne
and into the far-flung monstrosity
of golden sunset clouds.

All the daylong
the heavenly dome
and all its roof
has declared His glory.

And then day is done
and the shadows of the evening
as the vanguards of night
steal across the sky.

The sun,
through the haze of incense
the color of blood,
even His precious blood,
is the symbol of the Host
in benediction.

The gates of heaven
seem open very wide
to man below.

O Jesus,
now the day is done,
with Thy tenderest blessings
of calm and sweet repose,
put Thy weary people to bed
like little children all.

The great altar is dark
and it is night.

This Lenten Day Is Dying

Spirit and flesh
are aware that night comes
on apace.

In the spiritual realm
mauve twilight deepens toward stricter fast
and blackest night of Good Friday.

In the physical world
shadows lengthen
over the Mission garden now bare.

World and spirit are yet
in a seasonal dark valley
but the ascending way is near ahead.

After a devastating winter
at long last the lazy evening air is mild;
spring distant but a week.

Beneath the garden
there is a quickening and pulsing and pushing
of verdant leaf and bloom to be.

The last parting rays
of a warmer sun sinking,
foretelling June.

The soul is aware
that as Passiontide and death must come,
Easter and resurrection will hasten after.

In the holy pageantry of worship
in the Mission church and in the Mission garden
night looms but pledges a joyous morning.

The deepening twilight is charged with promise.
The somber birds of Lent and Winter
have but a little way to flutter
and the birds are on the wing.

The Gardener

Lord,

You made me a gardener
in your Sherwood garden.
I've toiled through the seasons
and the years.

Many souls
that had their roots in cinders
now grow in soil
that fertile richness bears.

But Lord,
some of my plants
that should be a rose or violet
persist in growing up
obnoxious weeds.

Lord, I pray,
make all plants in my garden
grow to Thy glory
and to fulfill Thy needs.

My son,

Since the day
 of good earth's creation,
Mine it has been
 to sow some good seeds of grain;
Mine the wisdom
 to send the proper seasons;
Mine to send
 the sunshine and the rain.

Throughout the ages
I've yearned for each plant
 to reach perfection,
to provide the means
 to every end I go.

But I have never forced
a single plant
 to please me.
I've never even forced
a single plant
 to grow.

Uncle Billie

Uncle Billie, God rest his soul, once told that until he was a youth of fifteen he had never left Lost Cove where he was born, except for Sherwood's half-mile-wide valley immediately beyond the mountains hemming in the Cove. From the mountaintops he frequented, he could look down into the valley a few miles long.

But at age fifteen came the great opportunity to travel twelve miles by wagon to the present site of St. Mary's School near Sewanee. From the bluff where the school now stands, Uncle Billie looked down over endless miles of rich flat farming country stretching on beyond Winchester toward the Mississippi. The vastness, the expanse of the earth, surpassed the boy's largest dream and he exclaimed in crude reverence at the majesty he beheld, "So that's the world. God Almighty ain't she a whopper!"

The Building of a Garden

*AWAKE, O north wind; And come, thou south;
Blow upon my garden, That the spices thereof
may flow out. Let my Beloved come into His garden,
And gather His precious fruits.*

A Garden belongs to the Mission. It is not much of a garden, rather the beginning of a garden. But as the years pass, there is more definite form and substance. The shepherd of souls is the chief gardener, but the Mission youths are the gardeners who toil.

In the beginning the soil was impoverished; in fact it was not soil at all, but cinders that grew cockleburrs. The under-gardeners hauled soil in wheelbarrows for days and months, and then a flood came and in one night washed away all but the cinders. To hold the soil that was next brought to make the garden, flowerbeds were raised above flood level and walled about with stone and with brick made by the boys in the garden.

Now there is an addition to the walls, a pool 9 x 18 feet in size with fish, bulrushes, and lilies. Boys with boy-made brick have paved thirteen hundred square feet of walks. In the spring a thousand tulips, the collection of seven years, bloomed in one bed. This summer there is a circular bed of one hundred tuberoses set in a rectangle of periwinkle backed by tithonia. Among more than seventy varieties of growing things in other beds bloom two hundred rose plants, zinnias, dahlias, and gladioli; and there are vegetables too.

Whence came this array? Mother Jones brought the first rose plants from the plantation in 1932. Bulbs, cuttings, roots, and seeds have been contributed from Sherwood and from members of the Greater Congregation. There are lilies from Connecticut and New Hampshire and dahlias from Delaware

among many gifts. Seed men and nurserymen have been generous.

This beginning of a garden blooms, but behind the blooms is much patience and tenacious toil. The gardeners have planted and pruned, watched and watered, and in turn shivered or sweltered and sweated. Truly much work has been done – thousands of hours of work – and each hour of toil has canceled an hour of idleness.

Many a young man is the proud owner of stock in the garden – and in the garden has sometimes said, “I made these bricks,” or perhaps it was an arch or wall he made, a pool or a walk.

Someone who toils, one whose hands are callous, looked upon the garden and was moved to declare, “Much work has been done and is done here.” Such is this garden.

Promise of the Garden

The garden has been a dormant thing
through weary winter, dull and drab,
and full of shrouds of burlap and straw
entombing plants against the frost.

Now in mid Lent, the Garden is gaunt.
It appears as though it had kept a strict fast,
as though its beauty is heavily veiled
for Passion Tide.

Today the soil is cold,
the wind sharp, the sun pale,
and yet one cannot enter the garden
and fail to feel a push
and a throb in the soil –
pregnant with promise of spring.

When Easter comes to the Garden,
a thousand entombed plants
will be bursting forward and upward
into resurrection.

Ghost of a Garden

The garden at midnight,
in the season of this writing,
has been found as a gossamer thing
just as the waning moon
cleared the eastern mountain
to plow through the stars.

Taking away the material
substance of the garden
and leaving it an ethereal thing.
The real garden gone –
only the soul of the garden real.

The garden at midnight
brought to memory a visitor
who once came to the garden altar
and knelt and prayed there.

She exclaimed . . .

“When the Mission’s last picture is painted,
when all now living have passed
from work to reward,
when the garden altar and walls
have crumbled
and cockleburs grow on the ruin –
let us ask God
to let us come back some Christmas
to the ghost of this garden
for a glorious midnight Mass.”

On that recent midnight,
there was only a ghost of the garden.
And in the ghost garden midnight Mass
at the garden altar
at some point in eternity,
it seemed as rational as immortal life.

Perhaps it is childish
to dwell on that Mass,
even in fancy,
but it is a sweet and lovely vision.
A bit of heaven once of earth,
come back to earth again.

All the acolytes
the Mission ever had,
all who were ever numbered
with the Mission
or the Greater Congregation.

All the children,
assembled with the angels
in the Mission garden.

All to whom faith was natural
and all to whom faith was a struggle,
no longer needing a creed
in the light of mutual knowing.

Every voice lifted in heavenly paeans.
The ghosts of all the candle flames
that ever graced the Mission altars,
the ghosts of all the incense ever offered.

Perhaps behind the garden altar,
where now stands a statue of Holy Mary,
she might really come and stand
with the ghosts of all the roses.

And she might actually hold in her arms
no less than the eternal Christmas Child.
While all the stars of the heavens
gathered of their will for her diadem,
pale in His blinding glory.

For over 20 years until his death in 1952, George W. Jones was the priest at Epiphany Mission Episcopal Church in Sherwood, Tennessee, located in the Cumberland Mountains.

After the death of his mother in 1939, family and friends tried to encourage him to come home to Georgia to live. “Are not ten years of service in Sherwood and three thousand Masses at those altars enough? Why not come home to your people and the soil you love and grow roses and write story books?” His response was simple, “Lonely without mother! Home to brethren! They so little understand. These Sherwood people, . . . these souls growing in God’s Sherwood garden – these are the priest’s mother and his brethren.”

It would be here at the Mission that Father Jones would grow his roses in the beautiful Mission Garden and here that he would write his stories. He began publishing *The Booklet*, a report of Mission activities and “little true stories of the Mission people and their lives.” It is through *The Booklet* that he not only touched the lives of the people at the Mission, but also the many souls that made up the “Greater Congregation,” friends and supporters of the Mission all across the country.

Father Jones once wrote, “Letters and little notes from the Mission to you, the Greater Congregation, do require in the aggregate a large amount of time, but in addition to being a bounden duty, they are both a treasured privilege and pleasure.” Through his poems, stories and letters he offered words of encouragement and inspiration.

It was in *The Booklet* that the writings contained in this collection first appeared. His words continue to inspire today.

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