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The Poetry of John Stone, MD

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Stone J. *Music from Apartment 8: New and Selected Poems*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; 2004.

Medicine and literature are both fundamentally concerned with the human condition, and the physician and the poet can be said to share a common goal: healing. Medicine heals the body and poetry the spirit [1].

There has long been a fascination with physician-poets, from John Keats to Oliver Wendell Holmes to William Carlos Williams [1]. Writings of physician-authors have been used in medical schools to promote humanism in medicine by encouraging students to reflect on the experiences of illness, loss, aging, and death [2] and by providing historical perspective, reminding us how much medicine has changed and how much it has stayed the same.

John Stone, a well-known contemporary physician-poet who often made medicine the subject for his work, said that writing poetry made him a better physician [1]. In the introduction to *On Doctoring*, an anthology of literature about medicine that he co-edited, Stone writes: “In the process of caring for their patients, physicians have a unique—and privileged—window on the full range of human emotions. Literature, too, is rich in its descriptions of individual illnesses and plagues, in its capacity to reveal patients’ reactions to illness and doctors’ dilemmas in providing care” [3].

Stone, a cardiologist who also served as a professor of medicine, associate dean, and director of admissions at Emory University School of Medicine, created one of the first medical school courses that combined the study of literature with medicine [4]. He began his literary career in 1972 with an anthology, *The Smell of Matches*, followed by *In All This Rain* (1980), *Renaming the Streets* (1985), and *Where Water Begins* (1998). He also produced a collection of essays, *In the Country of Hearts* (1990), which reflects on his career in medicine [4].

Music from Apartment 8 (2004) was Stone’s final published work (he died of cancer in 2008). The collection includes 22 new poems and a “best of the best” sampling from his four previous books. His new poems are divided into three sections, one describing his adventures with his 95-year-old mother, another his memories of the Middle East, and the third his experiences growing up in Mississippi and Texas [5].

The collection showcases Stone’s lyrical language. With only a few short verses, he

is able to evoke feelings of nostalgia, hope, love, and compassion. Some of his recollections feel like memories: whimsical, multi-colored, slightly hazy on the edges, lying just out of reach. Others are deceptively simple and powerful. “After Surgery” and “Spiritual,” two of the new poems in *Music from Apartment 8*, illustrate Stone’s gift with words and imagery.

In “After Surgery,” Stone and his mother sit on the deck at her retirement community, Serenity Gardens, “rambling in childhood, tumbling/ in the sieve of memory” [6]. A physical therapist arrives:

We know why she has come:
to stretch my mother’s tight quads,
to lengthen her thin contracted hamstrings
in a session worthy of the rack....

Imagine her surprise, then,
when my mother and I rise
from the flight deck of Serenity Gardens,
moving aloft together, in a dream
of a winged escape from prison [7].

These lines capture the inevitable march of age, the pain that persists and becomes part of each day—and yet cannot contain or trap imagination or spirit. The aging body will not serve as a prison for himself or for his mother. They will

...soar
into the blue wild yonder
on the bird bones of osteoporosis
riding high and well [7]

beyond the reach of pain and illness. It is a reminder to those of us who care for patients that we are all more than our bodies’ limitations; we are all more than a disease.

“Spiritual” is an account of the death of Stone’s father in which the superficially clinical is deployed to heart-wrenching effect.

He died before
coronary care
Before the defibrillator

Before lidocaine
Monitors
Before intensive care

nurses.

They put him in
an oxygen tent

They made the diagnosis
just for show
They hoped the best for him.

We let him go [8].

This poem takes us back in time—before emergency rooms, before “cath” labs—and shows us the resignation and helplessness patients and families must have felt when confronted with the limitations of what medicine could do.

The selections from Stone’s previous books include well-known pieces that have been taught in medical schools, such as “Cadaver,” “He Makes a House Call,” and “Death.” One of Stone’s shortest poems, but nevertheless still powerful, “Death” manages to capture the feeling of one moment in time.

I have seen come on
slowly as rust
sand

or suddenly as when
someone leaving
a room

finds the doorknob
come loose in his hand [9].

The reader can picture the scene: a moment of surprise, of realization, and then questions of how and why. Stone takes a common and yet mysterious experience and makes it bittersweet and very human.

References

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