An afternoon with the physician-poet John Stone

Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

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Dr. Stone was also a member of the editorial board of *The Pharos*. He died in 2008.

> A GOOD poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two times and he is great.
>
> —Randall Jarrell[1]

In November 2003, the president of the Lynchburg Academy of Medicine invited Dr. John Stone to speak to our medical community. He was familiar with Dr. Stone's work as a cardiologist and poet, and he had an ulterior motive—he wanted to improve his own writing skills. He arranged for Dr. Stone to conduct a writing seminar for physicians interested in writing, to be followed by an evening talk on poetry and medicine. I was one of four physicians gathered around a small table in a hospital conference room to hear Dr. Stone speak about his craft.

Walking to the seminar through the parking lot, I watched as Dr. Stone stopped to admire the gingko trees that lined the hospital drive, bright gold in late fall.[2] Those moments in the parking lot were the most memorable of the day. I recall how he suddenly stopped, looked around, and asked me if I had ever noticed the trees. I said, no, I really hadn't. But I did then. After looking closely at the trees, I paused, and then took a good look at him. I noticed his gray beard, slightly hunched back, and bulging stomach. Who was this man in a light brown jacket, standing in the middle of a doctor's parking lot in Central Virginia on a cold fall day, turning in every direction to examine gingko trees as cars and doctors passed by? *He notices things*, I said to myself. *He is easily awed*. He later showed me his poem about gingkos and scribbled a line of poetry in my copy of one of his books.

During the seminar, Dr. Stone read poems by William Carlos Williams. His clear, mesmerizing voice reminded me of the importance of reading poetry aloud. He read his own poems. He talked about the medical practice and writing life of William Carlos Williams. He fondly recalled a visit to Williams' home in Rutherford, New Jersey. He gave rules and suggestions for writing poetry: Write it down. Get out of bed. Get a job! Make every adjective earn its way. And most importantly: Know what to leave out.

Since that afternoon, I have enjoyed reading and discussing Dr. Stone's poems, particularly those related to medicine. I frequently use "Talking to the Family" and "Death" when teaching residents about breaking bad news or coping with loss.

I'm always on the hunt for new poems that offer insights into the art of doctoring. Not long ago, Garrison Keillor published in the *Writer's Almanac*, his electronic newsletter,

Whittling: The Last Class

What has been written
about whittling
is not true

most of it

It is the discovery
that keeps
the fingers moving

not idleness

but the knife looking for
the right plane
that will let the secret out

Whittling is no pastime

he says
who has been whittling
In spare minutes at the wood

of his life for forty years

Three rules he thinks
have helped
Make small cuts

In this way

you may be able to stop before
what was to be an arm
has to be something else

Always whittle away from yourself

and toward something.
For God's sake
and your own

know when to stop

Whittling is the best example
I know of what most
may happen when

least expected

bad or good
Hurry before
angina comes like a pair of pliers

over your left shoulder

There is plenty of wood
for everyone
and you

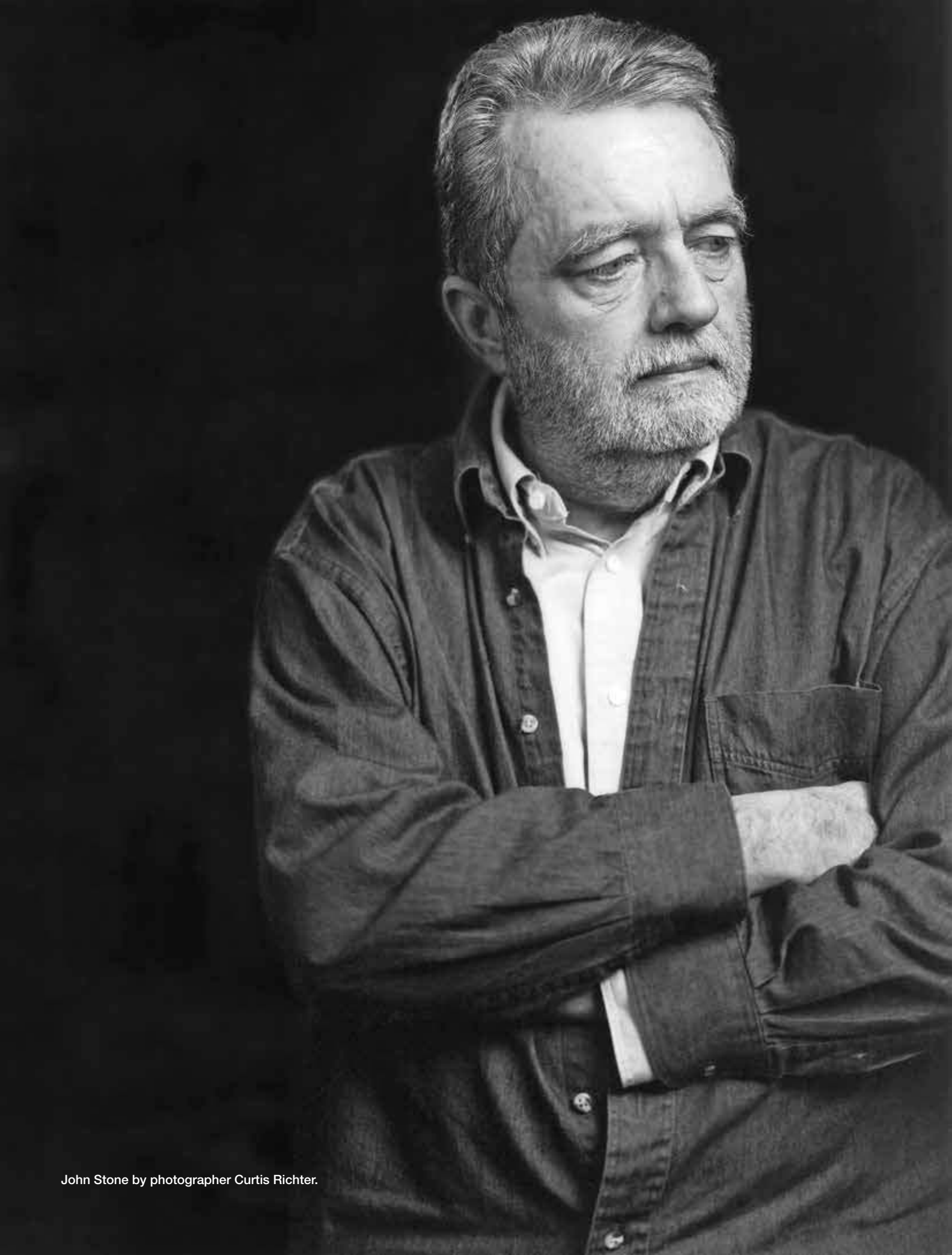
Go ahead now

May you find
in the waiting wood
rough unspoken

what is true

or
nearly true
or

true enough.[3]



John Stone by photographer Curtis Richter.

Dr. Stone's "Whittling: The Last Class." Reading this remarkable poem prompted me to review my notes from Dr. Stone's visit to Lynchburg, reflect on the poem, and relate some of the things I learned.

"Wood" is first a metaphor for life. Whittling our life, living it, gives it shape. "*Make small cuts*." If you don't, you may create a life you never intended. Go slow, don't rush into things. Take time to think things through. But don't idle or obsess, keep moving—"it's the discovery that keeps the fingers moving." And remember—time is short. Make wise decisions "before angina comes like a pair of pliers." Create a career and life that fits your interests, talents, and personality. There is enough wood to go around for everyone.

Making wise decisions is not easy to do. Physicians train for many years, but most of us know it takes many more to become a good doctor—if we are willing to learn from our mistakes, learn from our patients and colleagues, and keep learning our profession and craft. And are we wise enough to be good people? To have time for family, friends, and personal recreation—to prevent burnout, or worse, angina's grip?

"*Always whittle away from yourself and toward something*." If you whittle away from yourself and toward something bigger than yourself, you are less likely to get hurt. Have goals—and makes those goals bigger than you. Physicians understand this: it's the paradox of altruism. Search for and move toward important things like truth and wisdom, realizing there are limits to your understanding.

"*Know when to stop*." Strive to know your own heart and the hearts of your patients, but don't push too far or strive too hard, lest you lose all you've gained. Wisdom is knowing when to stop, knowing when you have arrived at a truth (or a diagnosis!) that is good enough, true enough.

"Wood" is also metaphor for poetry. Whittling is how you write it. Make small cuts. Go slow. Think about every word and punctuation mark. What is really necessary? Write about things outside of you. Good poetry reaches out and resonates with many readers. Find novel ways to express universal truths, understanding that there are limits to your ability to articulate them. Know when to stop writing—the point where you have expressed "what is true or nearly true, or true enough."

John Stone spent a distinguished career at Emory University School of Medicine, practicing and teaching cardiology to several generations of medical students, residents, and fellows. In his practice and in his poetry he focused his attention on the heart. In a collection of his essays entitled *In the Country of Hearts: Journeys in the Art of Medicine*, he refers to two hearts: the literal heart—the focus of the cardiologist Dr. Stone—and the metaphorical heart, that of the poet John Stone, who wrote, "I am speaking now of the heart as a synonym for sensibility, sensitivity, as the seat of the emotions, if you will—the heart about which Pascal wrote, 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.' *That* heart."[4] It's the organ pumping empathy to the hands, faces, and mouths of physician-healers. The heart that takes in the beauty of golden gingko trees on a cold autumn day that then flows out as poetry from a poet like John Stone.

One of the last rules of poetry Dr. Stone discussed that memorable day was this: memorize a poem every once in a while. He suggested the following poem by Derek Mahon—a poem to help physicians cope with death and dying. And a perfect poem to honor the life of the physician-poet, John Stone:

Everything Is Going to Be All Right

How should I not be glad to contemplate
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?
There will be dying, there will be dying,
but there is no need to go into that.
The poems flow from the hand unbidden
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.
The sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right.[5]

References

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3. Stone J. Music from Apartment 8. Baton Rouge (LA): Louisiana State University Press; 2004: 81–82.
4. Stone J. In The Country of Hearts: Journeys in the Art of Medicine. New York: Delacorte Press; 1990: 7.
5. Mahon D. Selected Poems. London: Penguin Books; 2000: 78.

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