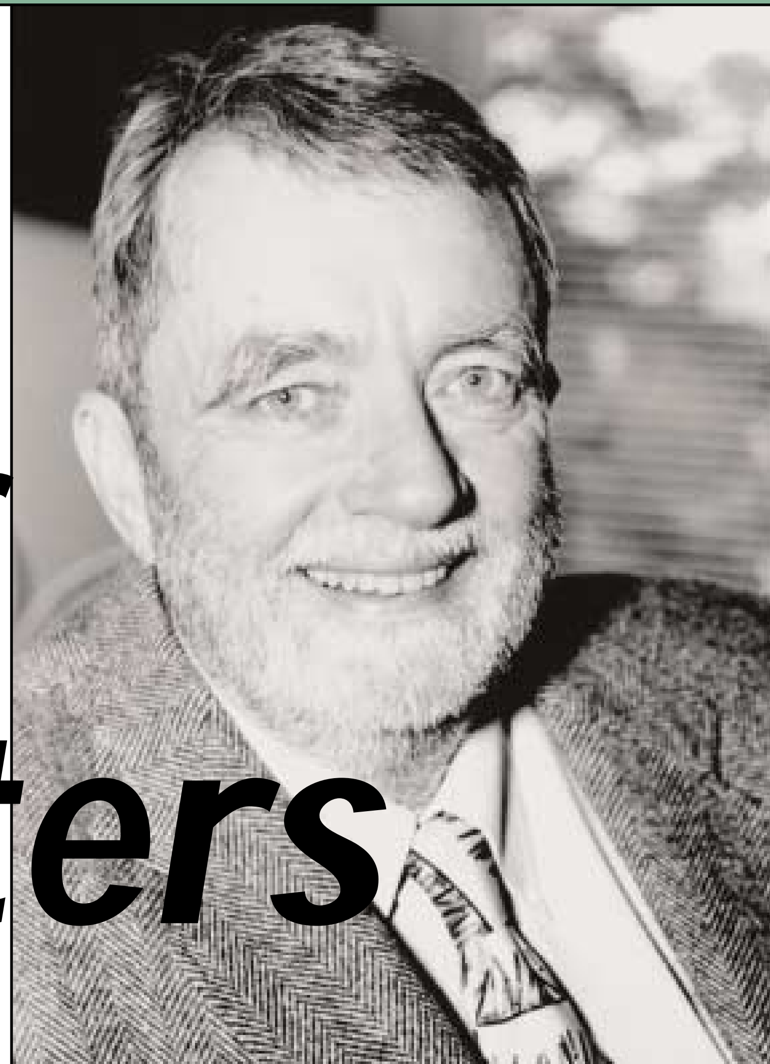
by J. D. Graffam

Doctor of Letters



A cardiology professor at Emory University who served for nearly two decades as the medical school's director of admissions and associate dean, John Stone (B.A. 1958) is a consultant to the dean's office of alumni and emeritus faculty relations. He also lectures in the English department and teaches a course in literature and medicine at the Emory College British Summer Studies Program in Oxford.

The author of four books of poetry, Stone was awarded a second literary award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters in May 1999 for *Where Water Begins*. His book of essays, *In the Country of Hearts: Journeys in the Art of Medicine*, was recently reissued and discusses how poetry and medicine often cross paths.

Stone is also the co-editor of an anthology of literature and medicine entitled *On Doctoring: Stories, Poems, Essays*, which is presented annually as a gift from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to students entering medical school in the United States.

A gifted educator, Stone has been selected three times as the Best Clinical Professor at Emory, has received Emory's Thomas Jefferson and University Scholar/Teacher awards, and was selected by Emory's Medical Alumni Association for the Evangeline T. Papageorge Distinguished Faculty Award for excellence in teaching.

His many other honors include the American College of Physicians' Nicholas E. Davies Memorial Scholar Award for work in the humanities; Albany Medical College's Theobald Smith Award for distinguished service to mankind in the fields of science, medicine, and teaching; and the State of Georgia Governor's Award in the Humanities.

In an interview with the *Stylus* editor, Dr. John Stone applies his literary stethoscope to the human condition

What was your major as an undergraduate here at Millsaps?

In 1958, I received a B.A. degree with a major in chemistry. A B.A. degree (as opposed to a B.S.) required foreign-language credits, plus some philosophy, both of which I'd had. So I took all the premedical requirements and all the chemistry courses. But I spent a lot of time in Murrah Hall and the Christian Center, taking English courses (Shakespeare and Victorian poetry), German, and philosophy of religion.

As an undergraduate, how did you handle the seemingly different ideals that your scientific studies and your literary studies represented?

I've never thought that the two fields of study were that different from one another. Science and literature, after all, are both ways of knowing, of understanding the world. The word "science" reminds us of this fact in its etymology: "Scio" — (Latin) "I know." But literature is also a way of knowing, of discovery, of asking and answering questions about this strange and marvelous world in which we all live. I once said (in a convocation address, where one is allowed a touch of high rhetoric): "All windows open to the same world." Both science and the humanities explore that common world and both are shaped by it. I continue to believe strongly that humanities majors need to know more science — and science majors need to know more humanities. Scientists will unravel and display the human genome — but the accomplishment of that scientific feat brings with it parallel moral and philosophic questions that must be addressed by a different part of the intellect.

I have an excellent mentor on my side in this matter, notably Dr. William Carlos Williams, the New Jersey physician-poet who won the Pulitzer Prize and also managed to deliver 3,000 babies. This is what he said in his autobiography, in the chapter called "Of Medicine and Poetry": "When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount for me to nearly the same thing." Dr. Williams gives us a further clue to his feelings a couple of pages later when he writes, "I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the poor, defeated body into those gulfs and grottos." His medicine and his poetry were deeply interconnected.

I would add only that medicine is the profession par excellence in terms of achieving this privileged union of science and the humanities. Medicine is not so much a science as it is the application of science to human beings. There is a significant difference.

Going through medical school is obviously hard on a person, both emotionally and physically. Did you write during that time in your life, and if so, what role did it play in either easing or intensifying those stresses and anxieties of medical school?

Medical school was rigorous, from the first day, with little letup for the next nine years (11 years, counting military service). But it was an infinitely rewarding task, to see for ourselves how the body works, its anatomy and physiology:

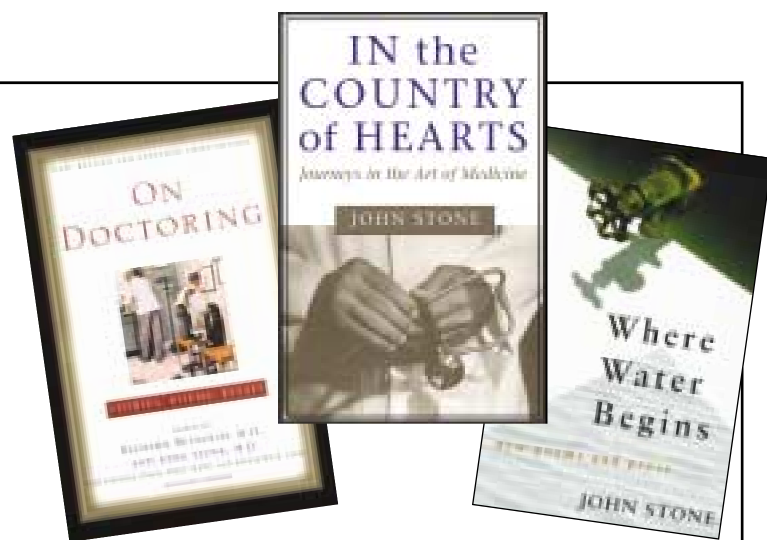
> "Fitting the labels
> in our books
> to our own tense tendons
> slipping in their sheaths
>
> we memorized the body
> and the word. . . ."
>
> "Cadaver," page 4, *The Smell of Matches*,
> Louisiana State University Press

"Cadaver" is basically the first poem I wrote after I was "medically educated." It was written, though, about 10 years after I was in anatomy class. So my answer is no, I wasn't writing poems, except for phrases and jottings on 3-by-5 cards, while I was in medical school. But the poems were being written — they were just not being written down. Leafing now through *The Smell of Matches*, my first book, I am struck by how many of the poems are medically based. My three subsequent books of poetry are less medically influenced, I'd wager.

How does being a doctor affect your writing? And vice versa?

One of the secrets of good doctoring and good writing is paying attention to the world around us. Garcia Lorca wrote, "The poet is the professor of the five bodily senses." So, in the best of circumstances, is the physician. We look, we listen, touch, smell, taste the world. Such physical involvement in the world keeps us alert to its nuances, its epiphanies, its startlements (if that's a neologism, I accept it). The poet's duty is to be astonished. That is also the duty of the physician: to find each patient's story "new," no matter how many times he or she may have heard it before. A "listening" posture, a posture of expectation, not only produces better medical care, but it also renews the physician in the daily work of tending to the sick.

I was influenced in this regard early on. In my poem "Cadaver," quoted above, I discovered that the man on whose body we worked had had syphilis. The disease had attacked his heart and killed him. That discovery had the effect of humanizing our cadaver: This was not merely the study of anatomy. No. This was a man who taught us what it is to be human, to live, to make love, to contract and to die of syphilis. It was as if the woman from whom he'd contracted the disease was still there with him, on that granite dissection table, after all those years. That discovery, in the first year of medical school, convinced me to expect interesting stories from people I meet (including patients). I have not been disappointed.



As far as you could tell, what was the Millsaps student body perception of *Stylus* when you were editor in the late 1950s?

I doubt that *Stylus* was considered the central aesthetic experience that all of us who worked on it hoped it was. But a literary magazine was crucial in the maturation of those of us interested in putting the best words in their best order. There were strong experiences in the arts going on all over campus. For example, I played in the (quite small) Millsaps band: We played some big pieces! The Millsaps Players were extremely active under Lance Goss, also staging big plays such as "Hamlet." The Millsaps Singers held a great appeal for many of us — to this day I can't hear Handel's "Messiah" without being back in Jackson singing "Hallelujah." These experiences were formative ones, crucial ones, for the majority of the student body in those days, I'd say.

What writers were an inspiration to you when you were younger and why? What about now? Especially now that you have had a life full of your own achievements in writing?

While I was a student at Millsaps, a young assistant professor of biology, Miller Williams, and I got together often to talk poetry. I never took a class with Miller. But we were both writing and we learned from each other, reading poems to each other, each contributing, importantly, to the other's work. The talk was the crucial part. We talked at his faculty apartment (he was married and living next to the Lambda Chi House, in which I lived). We talked about good writing. We submitted poems to be considered for publication — I'd published some "haiku" while in high school, but at Millsaps I began to read the "little magazines" — those were our tutors. As I matured through the years, a whole group of writers became personally important to me, including Miller Williams (who has published many books and directed the University of Arkansas Press). I went to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont (the oldest in the country) for three summers between 1969 and 1972. I served as physician (and psychiatrist!) for that conference. I met and was influenced by many writers there: John Ciardi, John Frederick Nims (who edited the superb anthology called *Western Wind*), Maxine Kumin (who won the Pulitzer Prize), William Meredith, Barry Hannah. It was an inspiration to see (and hear) so many writers talk about writing. I learned there to read critically, to discover other writers who were to become crucial in my own development: Richard Wilbur (one of our great "formalist" poets); Howard Nemerov; James Dickey; Derek Mahon; Seamus Heaney; Emily Dickinson; Frost, of course, and William Carlos Williams. My own "remedial education" in literature is ongoing and takes curious turns from time to time. I'm always discovering "new" voices, such as those of Billy Collins and Stanley Kunitz — but I also like to return often to old friends such as Emily Dickinson: I think she is America's best poet at this point in our literary history.

Lewis Nordan says "all comedy is underpinned by loss." Your poetry seems playful with its use of language, but your themes often center on tragedy or death or loss. How would you apply Nordan's interpretation of comedy to your own experiences with reading and writing?

A theologian friend, Dr. Kathleen O'Connor, who teaches at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, recently wrote a book called *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Her book deals with the book of Lamentations in the Bible. I was struck, in reading her work, that it explores (in a much more rigorous way, of course) the same crucial questions students were asking in my philosophy of religion class back at Millsaps. What is the nature of God? Is God omnipotent? If God is omnipotent, why do such "bad things happen to good people"? It's the lamentations of the world that move us as human beings. Doctors are reminded daily of the fact (as my first publisher told me) that "we're involved in the losingest game of all." The poet's writing often reflects that fact: The tears of the world get our attention. Stanley Kunitz wrote "How scrawny is the language of joy." But the world's inevitable losses are leavened and tempered by humor — in the longer run, we have much to be thankful for. As I wrote in *Canticles of Time* (the choral symphony written for Millsaps' centennial in 1990):

> Blake was right: within our days
> "Joy and Woe are woven fine."
>
> Yet, of the faces we put on
> the most enduring one is joy.
>
> Even the plainest word is praise:
> I speak. Therefore I celebrate. . . .

I hope — I believe — that's true.

Does that interpretation differ when it is applied to your own life, especially to your life as a doctor?

No, it's fundamentally the same whether I'm talking as a poet, a physician, or a physician-poet.

Millsaps has named a building after you, John Stone Hall. How do you feel about this, and what do you hope other students can gain from seeing your name on this particular building?

I know of no other kind of building on which I'd rather have my name. The word "doctor" comes from the Latin, "docere," which means "to teach." I feel privileged that my name is on a building on a campus where scholarship, teaching, and truth are so prized, as they are at Millsaps. Having a building named after you is something you don't or can't earn: You fall into such an auspicious honor and hope somehow to deserve it in the future.

One thing I'm happiest about is that both the Women's Studies Center and the Writing Center are in John Stone Hall. These are both first-rate and worthy endeavors I'm happy to be associated with. Learning to communicate, to write and speak together, are among the most important things any humans do.

If you could give undergraduate students two pieces of advice regarding life and career, what would they be and why?

Identify those passions, those pursuits, that engage you as you go through life. In life, as in college, major in what you're interested in! You'll come out better in the long run. (The converse of this is also important: If you don't like to eat broccoli, don't eat it.)

And follow those passions expectantly: Allow your current passion to lead you to the next one. Expect joy and be prepared to celebrate.

My own passions have included music, which, after literature, is my chief intellectual passion (Shostakovich to Bach and all the composers I can manage in between); Emily Dickinson; Anton Chekhov; William Faulkner; John Keats; John Donne; contemporary Irish poetry; learning how to use the language better. My chief and most precious personal passions are my family.

How would you say your Millsaps liberal arts education prepared you for the "real world," and more specifically your career as a successful doctor and published poet?

Millsaps was the perfect place for my education. There were bright, concerned faculty who loved to teach and were good at it. They allowed us students to think whatever we wanted, for as long as we wanted, whether it was demonstrably false or not; they predicted correctly that we would grow up at some point. They allowed us to use their words until we found our own. They granted us our passions; they revealed to us their own. And there were bright interesting classmates on the campus, many of them multidimensional human beings already. They might have gone anywhere, done anything in life. And, through the years, they have done just that. They have become professors of music and physics and surgery, deans of all sorts and persuasions, ministers, lawyers, accountants, high moguls, and the rest. Among the most fortunate of all these Millsaps graduates is one particular physician-writer.

(This interview originally appeared in the 2002 Stylus.*)*