

RUTH STONE

(1915—2011)

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RUTH STONE WAS an American poet and teacher of poetry. Born in Virginia and raised in Indiana, she married chemist John Clapp, Jr., in 1935, when she was twenty, and later gave birth to a daughter, Marcia. She first studied at the collegiate level, without formally enrolling, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; she later audited courses at Harvard University. After obtaining a divorce from her first husband, she married the writer Walter Stone in 1944, and he became the father of her two younger daughters, Phoebe and Abigail. Her work as a poet began to gain recognition, including *Poetry's* Bess Hokin Prize (1953) and a Kenyon Review Fellowship in poetry (1956), while her husband was a professor of English at Vassar College. But tragedy struck Stone's life when her husband committed suicide while on sabbatical leave in London.

With three daughters to raise on her own, Stone began a series of poetry residencies and visiting teaching positions at a number of colleges and universities across the United States, beginning with a two-year poetry fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When she was not teaching, she would return with her family to a farmhouse she had purchased in Goshen, Vermont. Her itinerant life ended after twenty-five years when she was awarded tenure at the State University of New York at Binghamton in her seventies. After her retirement, she received an honorary doctorate from Middlebury College in Vermont. She published thirteen print collections of poetry in her lifetime and received many awards, including a Pushcart Prize and the National Book Award; her book *What Love Comes To: New & Selected Poems* (2008) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Her verses express, with often acerbic wit, what has been called her "tragicomic vision": an unrelenting and incisive commentary on poverty, loss, the human body, relationships between men and women, odd characters on the edges of American communities, old age, the universe, and poetry itself. At times bawdy, at times profound, her poems never fail to make a sharp point.

CHILDHOOD

Ruth Swan Perkins Stone was born in the home of her maternal grandparents in Roanoke, Virginia, on June 8, 1915. She was the firstborn child of Roger McDowell Perkins and Ruth Ferguson Perkins, from whom she received her first name. Her middle name, Swan, was her paternal grandmother's maiden name, and it features significantly in poems alluding to her identity (as does her married name, Stone). Ruth had two younger siblings, Edgar and Elsie.

Ruth's father was trained as a printer, but he lived for his music, for he was a drummer. Ruth wrote of him in her poem, "Rhythm," which appears in her collection *Cheap* (1975):

I am the drummer's daughter.
He beat time out of me.
Rat-a-tat-tat
Rat-a-tat-tat
In Norfolk on the sea.
Young he was and handsome.
A gambler, by G.
I was his first-born daughter.
He rolled the dice for me.
And down I dropped ripe as a plum
Out of my mama's belly.

(p. 51)

In these lines, Stone expands and slightly varies the five-line limerick form, which is often used

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to express silly, funny, or even bawdy sentiments. But in “Rhythm,” Stone inverts convention, using a typically humorous form to convey serious matter—a characteristic of her poetry generally.

Her rhythm and rhyme make a sexual pun on her own birth story and suggest, not unlike Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” that she experienced the careless violence of her drunken father as a young girl. Later in “Rhythm” she writes of the birth of her brother and sister, the poverty of their family, and her father, asleep in her mother’s bed, who “smelled of strong whiskey” (p. 51). In the last stanza, she speaks of her deceased parents and her own identity:

My daddy’s dust is scattered.
My mama’s salt as the sea.
And when I’m ready to lay me down
Here’s what they’ll say of me.
She is a drummer’s daughter.
She learned what her daddy taught her ...
She’ll have to beat time, by G.

(pp. 51–52)

The music of drumbeats marches through Stone’s work. Many of her early poems have strong, readily discernable metric patterns and cadences that are evident in oral performance; if read silently, they echo rhythmically in the reader’s inner ear. This tendency in Stone’s poetry came not only from her father’s drumming but also from the classical music on phonograph records that her father played for his children on a windup Victrola and the reading he did aloud from the King James Bible as well as comical pieces by Bill Nye (the pen name of the nineteenth-century humorist and journalist Edgar Wilson Nye).

Like her father, Stone’s mother gave her the gift of music, for her mother was a singer. As Stone said, “When I think back, I had a mother who sang all the time. She just sang old songs around the house.... I was just used to hearing her singing, entertaining herself.... Can you imagine? There I was with a mother who sang and a father who played percussion. What could I do?” (deNiord, 2010, p. 49). She had to become a poet. In addition to singing, her mother introduced her to English poetry, helping her to develop her mind and ear for the future.

My mother read poetry—Tennyson—to me from the time, apparently, she started suckling me at her breasts. She loved Tennyson deeply. The *Idylls of the King* and all that. And she read them aloud to herself as she was nursing me. She had this big leather bound book of Tennyson. And it probably had a deep influence on me.

(Gilbert 1973, pp. 53–54)

Stone said that her mother loved her poetry, and when she herself became a mother, she would write down the poems her daughter Abigail, nicknamed “Blue Jay,” made up when she was in the bathtub. “This is the thing that has made me feel all children are poets and the parent who loves the poetry is the one who preserves the poet. It’s the parent who isn’t perceptive who kills it. Otherwise, we’d all be singing birds” (p. 55). So Stone knew music and poetry from infancy.

Through her parents’ Bible reading, Stone was also introduced to the elements of Christianity in childhood. Her father’s family attended the Presbyterian Church, and so she attended Sunday school as a child as well. There, she said, “I was listening, and I was thinking—I said, *this is not true*. This is not true, and I don’t believe it, you know. From then on, I had no religion.... I could see easily enough that everyone came to death and was put in the ground” (deNiord, 2010, p. 53). In her later years, it seems she neither had nor practiced any formal religious faith.

Yet her poem “The Tree,” published in her collection *Cheap* (1975) and republished in *Second-Hand Coat* (1987), suggests that the poet at times perceived a profound connection between herself and Jesus. In it, she writes of the death of her husband Walter in words and images that strongly evoke the suffering Christ on the Cross. Indeed, she expresses herself in “The Tree” like a medieval contemplative mystic imagining a spiritual marriage to Christ.

Stone alluded to ideas and passages from scripture in poems throughout her life. In her first book, *In an Iridescent Time* (1959), she was preoccupied at times with the problem of evil. She writes in “The Season” (poem 16), “I know what calls the Devil from the pits / With a thief’s fingers there he slouches and sits,” and she ad-

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dresses “Satan” directly in her poem “Experience” (poem 50). Later, in “On the Way,” she calls herself an “Aryan skeptic” (*Simplicity*, 1995, p. 61)—contrasting both her ethnic heritage and doubt with her husband Walter’s Jewishness and faith. Yet she often uses biblical source material to critique the problems of patriarchal theology on the one hand and the problems of the broken world on the other (as in her poems “A Male Tale” and “Prophets”). Elsewhere, she also echoes the words of Jesus (Luke 1:37) and, at the same time, affirms her belief in the possibility of an afterlife: “I do not doubt that all things are possible, / even that wildest hope that we may meet beyond the grave” (“Being Human,” *Topography*, 1971, p. 12). In an interview she gave in her nineties, she characterized that “wildest hope” as essentially no hope (deNiord, 2010, p. 54), but it seems her thoughts and feelings about eternal hope vacillated in her lifetime.

It is relatively easy to understand Stone’s ambivalence toward Christianity, given the cruelties of her father, who was Christianity’s first representative in her life, and the suffering she experienced after her husband’s suicide as well as her feminist rejection of patriarchy as she grew older. However, to miss the influence of Christian thought on Stone’s poetry is to miss out on a deeper understanding of how her doubts, throughout her life, were tempered by childhood faith.

Stone’s religious, social, and poetic sensibilities were further fostered in the home of her paternal grandparents, Edgar and Nora Perkins, in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she was raised, from age six onward, after her family returned there from Virginia. Her grandfather was a state senator, and her grandmother, the mother of seven children, was a writer and a painter. Stone long remembered that her grandmother’s easel was always set up in the kitchen. The well-established, upper-middle-class household provided new encouragement for her as a young girl surrounded by creative great-aunts and great-uncles who wrote poetry, played music, and painted. The storytelling at the family dinner table was full of laughter, which contrasted somewhat with the formal tea parties where Stone learned to pour

tea and act like a lady—things she later said that she “had to learn to forget” (Barker, p. 34).

Stone loved to remember the friendship she found in the house, where her grandmother’s youngest child, Harriet Perkins, was close to her in age. She wrote about her young aunt, who was nine when Stone was six and first arrived in Indiana, in poems like “Lighter than Air” and “How to Catch Aunt Harriet.” In addition to recalling eating ice cream and going swimming together, a seemingly stray pair of lines in “Lighter than Air” suggests that the two girls were allies when Indiana thunderstorms poured over the landscape: “The lightning flashed / and we hid in the closet; the thunder crashed” (*What Love Comes To*, p. 85). Perhaps the storms Stone remembered were not exclusively literal and climatic but metaphoric for darker experiences.

Stone was sexually abused as a young girl, and like many children who experience such abuse, she tried to escape the memory of it. A cousin, a boy, molested her on at least one occasion (Stone qtd. in Wheler). The extent of the abuse Stone experienced is unclear, but other poems, written both early and late in her publishing career, as in “Love’s Relative” (*In an Iridescent Time*, poem 52) or “All in Time,” particularly stanza 12 (*What Love Comes To*, p. 21), suggest that her father’s interactions with her were tainted. Stone’s early experiences of human sexuality influenced Stone’s formation as a woman, a poet, and later, a self-identified political and feminist writer (though, in her nineties, she apparently rejected the feminist moniker [deNiord, 2010, p. 51]). As a child, these experiences may have played their part in motivating her to read because reading let her out of the ordinary world, with its different forms of misery, and into the extraordinary world of the imagination.

Stone was an avid reader from the age of three. She recalled that after her mother turned off the light and went to bed, she would turn the light back on and read all night—and then get up and go to school the next day (Bradley, p. 73). As she grew older, she read great prose writers of the English, American, and Russian literary traditions. In her poem “Reading the Russians,”

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she remembers “all those Victorian translations / where I was transfixed: / lying stomach down on my bed / that summer of my fourteenth year, / a library book flat under my right thumb” (*In the Next Galaxy*, 2002, p. 53). She would read seven or eight books a week, but in school, she said, “I was bored!” (Bradley, p. 56).

In her poem “Grade School,” Stone pays homage to two of her elementary school teachers, Mrs. Ellery and Mr. Vollar, and notes, “Aesop, Shakespeare, Tennyson: at the start / of every day some poem we learned by heart” (*In the Next Galaxy*, p. 85). In Indiana in the 1920s, the memorization of poetry was a key part of elementary education, and this emphasis had a significant impact on Stone. She gained further motivation to pursue poetry on her own, apart from formal instruction, when she won a citywide poetry contest. The prize consisted of two books: an anthology of modern poetry and a book by Louis Untermeyer about the craft of poetry. Stone felt like it was a “great game” and a “total joy” (Bradley, p. 70) to write in all of the poetic forms she found in the book. Later in her life, in her Vermont farmhouse, she often would invite guests to play “the poetry game,” which involved writing poems on various subjects in different forms and reading these aloud.

Two of Stone’s most vivid memories from childhood were the time she looked up at the stars at night, in wonder and awe, and the time she went into the house of a stranger and saw his little daughter laid out in a coffin (Bradley, pp. 76–77). Stone spoke of these moments in interviews and alluded to them in her poems.

Parallel to my literary development was my interest in the natural sciences. When I was a kid, I used to lie on the grass in the summer and look up at the stars. And then I’d read. I’d get books from the library about the stars. I remember when I saw my first photograph of a galaxy. I can still see it in front of my eyes. It was astounding and beautiful. I completely accepted the whole thing.... I never lost that hunger, that need to know more and more and more. I accept the universe. I don’t fight against it. I know people who won’t look at the stars because they don’t want to. They are frightened and they don’t want to know.... it makes them fear their own death.

(Bradley, pp. 76–77)

As a mature poet, Stone would often seem to be caught between amazement at the beauty of the universe and the reality of death.

When she was a teenager Stone attended Shortridge High School. There she had the odd experience of feeling as if, for three months, the writerly part of her self went away: “I suddenly woke up to the fact that it was gone. I was devastated. And then it came back without my noticing it, and it went on” (Bradley, p. 71). This vulnerability to losing part of herself, her identity as a poet, would be exacerbated later in her life.

Stone’s high school years coincided with the Great Depression, a time period that she wrote about in her poem “Eden, Then and Now,” which begins in 1929, when Stone was fourteen years old. Years later, she memorialized in her poem the keen observations she made when her country changed after the stock market crashed, the “folks out of context, ... / This phenomenon investors said / would pass away” (*In the Next Galaxy*, p. 45). The biting double entendre of the final line in this quotation is typical Ruth Stone. She goes on in the poem to note that her father was then working for a daily paper (the *Indianapolis Star*) as a union printer and to admit that because he gave her mother a dollar a day they could consider themselves wealthy. But immediately after this revelation, the poet observes the harsh treatment the new poor faced. Though written long after the fact, these verses reveal when Stone first began to focus a hard eye on social injustice.

MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND LOSS

As a young woman Stone experienced another life-changing event: she met John Clapp, Jr. He became her husband on June 23, 1935, when they married in Marion, Indiana. She had turned twenty just two weeks earlier. Her father, Stone later said, was too poor to send her to college (Gilbert, p. 58). About her first husband, she said: “I didn’t want to marry him, and he was pressuring me, and everybody seemed to think he was right.... Obviously, I feared and hated him.... I tried to love my first husband the way I loved my family, and I was submissive to him, but he was very

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domineering” (Gilbert, pp. 58–59). Her poem “Shotgun Wedding” gives voice in verse to related feelings: “They approach the zenith / Rowing the air like a pair of swans / With blood-red eyes” (*Cheap*, p. 55).

The couple lived for a few years in Indiana, where John worked as chemist. When he was accepted to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, to study for his doctorate in physics, Stone studied informally at the university. After seven years of marriage Stone gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Marcia (b. 1942). But her marriage was “extremely unhappy and very unfortunate” (Stone qtd. in Gilbert, p. 57). In fact, there was domestic abuse in it, as there had been in Stone’s childhood. Stone said of her marriage to John that “I used to wake up every day and have *forgotten* all the terrible traumas of the day before, of living with a creature who was so alien, who assaulted me in some strange way and I had no defenses. And every day I’d forget all the happenings of the day before and start out again” (p. 57). Eventually, this situation was no longer tolerable, and Stone began to look for a way out. Her poem “1941” suggests she had a brief sexual relationship with an African American man in Indianapolis, which may have been her first step away from her unhappy marriage.

Later, at the University of Illinois, where her husband was a graduate student, Ruth Stone met Walter Stone, another writer. He was Jewish, the son of a “devout cantor” and an “Orthodox housekeeper,” as she says in her poem, “On the Way” (*Simplicity*, p. 61). They began an affair, when Stone was in her late twenties, based on mutual physical and intellectual attraction. In Stone’s words, “The reason Walter fell in love with me, I’m sure, is not only because of our physical attraction to one another but because of the writing” (Gilbert, p. 60). She wrote about their illicit trysts, the tenderness of them contrasted with the threat of death as the events of World War II exploded around the world, in “Coffee and Sweet Rolls,” recalling “dingy hotels / ... where we lay like embryos ... / to be issued out into the terrible world” (*Simplicity*, pp. 106–107). The shadow of World War II darkened the

early years of the relationship between Ruth and Walter, a shadow Stone memorialized in various poems including “In the Next Galaxy,” “That Winter,” and “Resonance.”

After Stone had been married for nearly a decade, her father helped her to obtain a divorce. On July 10, 1944, in San Francisco, California, she married Walter, who had been serving in the navy during World War II, during a three-day leave he had received from his navy base, Port Chicago, which was thirty miles north of the city by the bay. Walter left on what Stone later called a “leaky Liberty ship” for Kiska, an island in the Rat Islands group of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. The couple eventually had two daughters, Phoebe (born in 1949) and Abigail (“Blue Jay,” born in 1953). As adults, both daughters would become published writers.

At the end of World War II, Walter left the navy and was reunited with Stone. He attended graduate school at Harvard University. After first teaching in Illinois, he accepted the position of assistant professor of English at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1952. Stone’s training in her grandmother’s household proved useful as she played the role of a faculty member’s wife. But she felt that she was also recognized by the college community as different and accomplished in her own right (Gilbert, p. 62). Her husband promoted her poetry by typing it up and sending it out for publication, and she won *Poetry*’s Bess Hokin Prize in 1953 and the Kenyon Review Fellowship in Poetry in 1956, which was awarded by John Crowe Ransom, the first editor of the *Kenyon Review*. With the money from the fellowship, Stone bought the farmhouse in Goshen, Vermont, that she would make her lifelong home. Ruth and Walter both had books ready to be printed in 1959: her first poetry collection, *In an Iridescent Time, Poems, 1953–58*, and his as well, *Poems, 1953–58*, which was bound together with first books by Donald Finkel and Gene Baro and published as part of the volume *Poets of Today*, volume 6 (1959), edited by John Hall. Walter was already enjoying some additional financial success with a grant from the American Philosophical Society.

The couple appeared to be thriving, personally and professionally. Certainly when Stone

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spoke of the marriage in later years, she usually did so in glowing terms, for it was clearly happier than her first. Stone said that Walter was a “genius” who was very “supportive” of her poetry (Gilbert, p. 60). In *Poems, 1953–58*, Walter also spoke well of Ruth, describing her sensually (“Ten P.M.,” in Hall, ed., *Poets of Today*, p. 163), sexually (“The Web,” p. 164, and “Compelled to Love,” p. 166), and naturally:

She thinks like earth.
She ebbs and flows with private seasons.
Fall is her fruit,
and spring is her birth.
In winter she makes rhymes of reasons
and plays them on her flute.

(“Woman,” p. 168)

Clearly Ruth and Walter inspired one another as both lovers and writers. Yet like any marriage, theirs also experienced times of stress. This is suggested in Stone’s poem “Union,” in *In an Iridescent Time*, where she writes, “Her highness, smooth as egg, concealed as much.... He never cracked her shell or saw the bird / Undeveloped, piteous, absurd” (poem 41), and in Walter’s poems alluding to himself in the role of King Lear, who in Shakespeare’s classic play is an old man, with three daughters, who slowly loses his mind (see “Modern Poetry and the Tradition,” p. 151, and “Lear,” p. 173, in Hall, ed., *Poets of Today*). Much later, Stone would wonder if Walter, a smoker, had contracted throat cancer at this time, and if that had been affecting him as well (deNiord, 2010, p. 52). She certainly believed that secondhand smoke affected her for many years afterward.

Another source of strain may have come from nude photographs that Walter took of Stone and apparently shared with other navy sailors with whom he served during World War II. Walter alludes to these pictures in his poem, “Brothers”: “Sixteen first imagined her, setting her hair in a mirror. / The image remains with the sailors; she mirrors their sea” (p. 149). Ruth Stone refers to the images negatively in “One Reel Tragedy,” where she remembers:

About his neck he wears a camera
He has three eyes; one with insomnia.

...
Picture his Sundays in a darkened room
Where he prints and develops the prizes of the
groom.

Give and take, shutter and snap, her flesh
lies in the acid fixer, and the thresh-
hold of mirrors subdivides her soul.

...
He sells her piece by piece and pose by pose.
Her selves go stealing forth, a trade that grows

...
So her symbolic anonymity
Is shared in tortured prisons, and with free
Hoarse-throated boys with dirty hands; or deep
In the sea’s diatoms she may sleep
Beside a sailor’s beautiful picked bones
Safe in his sea chest while the planet groans.

(*In an Iridescent Time*, poem 54)

This poem can be compared to “When I Was Thirty-Five, You Took My Photograph” (*In the Next Galaxy*, p. 61), in which Stone expresses more detached feelings.

The idea conveyed by “Brothers” and “One Reel Tragedy,” namely that these photographs went down to a watery grave with navy servicemen during World War II, may reflect events from not only maritime battles but also from the Port Chicago disaster of July 17, 1944. The navy servicemen working at Port Chicago, located thirty miles north of San Francisco, endured a horrifying tragedy when 4,600 tons of munitions exploded. It happened as cargo handlers, all of whom were African American enlisted men, were packing bombs, depth charges, and ammunition into the SS *Quinault Victory* and SS *E. A. Bryan*, two merchant ships that were bound for the Pacific theater of the war. The explosion killed 320 men on the pier, including all of the cargo handlers, and injured nearly 400 more.

Ruth Stone writes about this disaster in her poem “Happiness,” which recalls the first days of her marriage:

The first night in our rented basement room,
as we came together ...
Port Chicago exploded!
Several thousand pounds of human flesh
shot like hamburger through the air;
making military funerals, even with wax,
even with closed caskets, bizarre.

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As well as certain facts: there were no white males loading ammunition on that ship.

(*Second-Hand Coat*, p. 46)

Every building at the Port Chicago base was damaged; several were flattened. Remaining servicemen were reassigned to Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, California. Meanwhile, Walter embarked for Kiska after this disaster with the memory of it, no doubt, vividly in his mind.

Walter's memories, along with whatever level of stress or strain he may have felt in his marriage (in relation to his wife, as a result of his paternal responsibility for his daughters, or because of an increasing sense of physical ill health), may have triggered a deeper sense of despair over time. As a Jewish American navy serviceman during World War II, he may have been affected by memories of trauma, including the later knowledge of the murder of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust. His poems from 1953 to 1958, however, suggest that he was wrestling with demons from his younger years. While his writing is versatile, inspired by metaphysical and Romantic poetry, on the one hand, and by Ruth, to whom he dedicated the book, on the other, it is also influenced by his own dark frame of mind. In several poems, he is clearly meditating on death.

In "Logos," Walter Stone speaks of the death of the singing bird, which seems emblematic of the poet himself:

the rot is in the root,
the tree of pleasure kills the singing bird,
the birds die and their dying kills the trees.
The furies turn flesh backward into Word
the mind runs mad and eats itself like fruit.
Dream me distractions more terrible than these!

(Hall, ed., p. 153)

In "Chronicle," he says, "I heard the doors of music close, / and felt my heart go wild, wild, / and I was ready then for death" (p. 157). In "Brothers," an elaborate poem in which he imagines himself as a succession of selves that he names by ages ("Five," "Sixteen," "Twenty-Two," and so on), and whom he calls "brothers," he writes about his final self dying:

in the long processions of seasons the house will decay,
the brothers will fade, with no one left to keep
the tall, old skeleton which declines with its owner:
in a rotting hallway the final brother will sleep.

(p. 150)

In "The Man of Property to His Muse," he writes, "I am warden / of a fine prison, and I die among my things" (p. 152). These poems reveal a progression in thought from fantasies of death ("distractions") to readiness for death ("I was ready then for death"), from death anticipated in a future time ("the final brother will sleep") to death experienced as a present reality: "I die among my things." These poems were a prelude to Walter Stone's last act.

In 1959 the family moved to London for Walter's sabbatical leave from Vassar. There, in a rented room, Walter Stone committed suicide at the age of forty-two. Stone received a phone call from a landlady who wanted to inform her of finding the body hung from a hook on the back of a door. But Stone handed the phone to her teenage daughter, Marcia, who was the first to hear the news clearly and then tell her mother. Stone then woke and told her young daughter, Phoebe, who fell to the floor, crying, "Not my daddy! Not my daddy!" So Stone did not wake the youngest child, Abigail, to tell her. Many years later, Stone expressed deep regret for this decision, which she apparently made in order to protect her youngest child—however briefly—from the terrible sorrow. That night, the bereaved family slept together in the same bed to try to comfort one another after receiving such terrible news (Stone qtd. in Block). The shock of this event irreparably altered Stone's world, and she would write about it in numerous poems over the course of the rest of her life.

At the time of his death, Stone had been with Walter for at least fifteen years and married to him for much of that time, during which they had shared life together: writing, parenting, and working in the academic community at Vassar College. As Stone said: "Sometime in the year after he died, I remember saying aloud or saying to myself, 'The bird has died.' It's exactly what happened. I really felt that the bird in me had

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died” (Gilbert, p. 64). In the immediate aftermath her husband’s death, Stone had to make arrangements to return home with her children. Then she went to work to support her family. In the long season of grief that followed, she felt that she lost her ability to remember: “I couldn’t remember anything. I just forgot more and more and more things. I couldn’t sleep; I didn’t sleep for a year except in little snatches” (p. 65). Stone was grieving, and she became severely depressed.

But she continued to write. In her poems, she does remember many things. Fighting against forgetfulness, her poems become like little lights in the dark. Stone herself became competent in new aspects of living. She continued to raise her daughters and run her house, but she also “began gardening, making fires, cutting wood, hauling oil” (p. 65). She grew through her loss even as she recorded its impact on her life in her poems.

WIDOWHOOD, TEACHING, AND WRITING

Ruth Stone was forty-four years old when she became a widow. Her first book of poetry was published, but she later said that neither it nor her husband’s poems published in *Poets of Today VI* meant anything to her: “They meant nothing to me. Absolutely nothing. All the reason for doing them had died with him” (Gilbert, p. 58). She had dedicated her book to Walter, and added, “With this book the author pays tribute to Vassar College on the occasion of its Centennial” (epigraph in *In an Iridescent Time*). Yet she had lost her husband, and with him, not only the college community where they had written and worked together but part of her identity, including, for a time, the “writerly part” of her self.

She began to recover her identity as a poet four years later. From 1963 to 1965 she held a two-year fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, where she both wrote and taught. While there, she formed close ties with other fellows, especially the poet Maxine Kumin and novelist Tillie Olson. She began to write the poems that would form the basis for her next poetry collection, *Topography and Other Poems*, which would be published in 1971. All three

women—Kumin, Olson, and Stone—would later be recognized and appreciated as significant feminist writers. However, at this time, Stone was already being recognized, specifically by the Poetry Society of America, which awarded her the Shelley Memorial Award for 1964–1965.

The Radcliffe fellowship opened up new opportunities for Stone to teach creative writing at colleges and universities across the country. For the next twenty-five years, she lived the life of an itinerant professor and poet in residence, teaching at Wellesley College in Massachusetts (fall 1965); Brandeis University in Massachusetts (1965–1966, 1975); the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1967–1969); the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (1971–1973); Centre College in Kentucky (winter 1975); University of Virginia, Charlottesville (1977–1978); University of California, Davis (spring 1978, fall 1978, spring 1981); New York University (fall 1984, fall 1985, spring 1986); Cooper Union in New York City (1986); and Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia (1989–1990). As a result of this constant journeying, she met many young poets across the nation and influenced their development, so much so that she became known as “Mother Poet” (Freeman, p. 10) and “America’s Akhmatova” (Willis Barnstone, on the back cover of *Simplicity*).

Although it seems that what she called the “poetry factory” (“Some Things You Need to Know Before You Join the Union”) treated Stone unfairly in providing only short-term appointments over more than two decades, Stone was conscious of the value of teaching only part-time because it gave her greater freedom to write. She did finally accept a full-time teaching position, and when she had been teaching for five years in a row, she commented, at the age of eighty-one, to J. F. Battaglia:

I think that probably the only way to really remain a writer in the best sense of the word is not to go into teaching and certainly not to go into scholarship. Not to go into the academic thing. I’ve only been steadily teaching for these five years because other times I’ve taught at the most two years and had a lot of space in between. Financially it may have been difficult, but artistically it was probably the only way I could do it. But now, I

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don't think it's as hard. I think I can manage it—I do manage it—I sort of don't allow my teaching and my writing to overlap in my mind.... I don't think that scholarship needs to hurt you. I think what hurts is the competitive pressure to write criticism and to do scholarship without it being meaningful to you.

Stone's commitment to earn enough money to give herself the freedom to write, if not a lifestyle of luxury, resulted in the production of vivid, astonishing, and wonderful collections of poems—and in verses that were lyrical, poignant, and shocking—that were recognized with significant awards from the very same “poetry factory” that she critiqued.

During her many years of traveling throughout the United States, Stone published *Unknown Messages* (1973), *Cheap* (1975), *American Milk* (1986), *Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected* (1987), and *The Solution* (1989), and she received many awards in this period for her creative work. In addition to the Shelley Memorial Award, she received two Guggenheim Fellowships (1972–1973 and 1975–1976), and she used the money from one of them to roof her house in Vermont—a fact she mentions in her poem “It Follows” (in which she ironically considers using the money to get a facelift instead). In 1983 she received the Delmore Swartz Award. In 1986 she received a Whiting Award. This time, she used the money to buy plumbing for her house. Stone was a practical poet.

In 1988 Stone received the Paterson Poetry Prize—and she reached a significant turning point in her teaching career. She held a visiting position in the English department at the State University of New York at Binghamton and then in 1989 accepted a tenure-track position, which she began in the spring term of 1990 in the year she turned seventy-five. She received tenure at the age of seventy-seven. She had already had a distinguished, if unusual, career as an American poet, but now she began to achieve recognition at a new level. From 1990 to 2000 she published three major poetry collections: *Who Is the Widow's Muse?* (Yellow Moon Press, 1991), *Simplicity* (Paris Press, 1996), and *Ordinary Words* (Paris Press, 2000), as well as the chap-

book *Nursery Rhymes from Mother Stone*. *Simplicity* won the Pushcart Prize, after being published with the support of an Eric Mathieu King Award from the Academy of American Poets, and *Ordinary Words* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. The (ironically titled) *Simplicity* was justly acknowledged as a tour de force in American poetry, containing one of Stone's most significant poems, “Scheherazade Is Nailed and Mailed in Five Days,” which Jan Freeman has called “a major American poem. A landmark” (p. 9).

In the subsequent decade, Ruth Stone published three more major collections of poetry, all with Copper Canyon Press: *In the Next Galaxy* (2002), which won the National Book Award in the same year that Stone received the Wallace Stevens Award “for proven mastery in the art of poetry”; *In the Dark* (2004), which won the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement; and *What Love Comes To: New & Selected Poems* (2008), which won the Milt Kessler Poetry Book Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Stone was named the poet laureate of Vermont in 2007; the state of Vermont also acknowledged her with the Walter Cerf Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts.

POETRY AND INSPIRATION

Ruth Stone often spoke of her poems coming to her in a rush, as if from outside of her, and how she would run to get a pen or pencil to write them down before they escaped.

It's a funny thing. Even as a child, I would hear a poem coming toward me from way off in the universe. I wouldn't hear it. I would feel it, and it would come right toward me. If I didn't catch it, if I didn't run in the house and write it down, it would go right through me and back into the universe. So I'd never see it again. I'd never hear it again. I've lost about ninety-nine percent of my poems this way. Sometimes I would catch the last line and write it through the bottom up. I have to say, I never thought they were mine. They weren't mine. They belonged somewhere else.

(deNiord, 2010, p. 50)

In addition to retelling this story many times to different people who asked about the source of her inspiration, Stone also wrote verses about

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how poems came to her. Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of the 2006 best seller *Eat, Pray, Love*, remembered Stone telling her about her experience of writing, and she paid homage to Ruth Stone in a TED talk (February 2009) on nurturing creativity. However, Stone also said that only about half of her poems came to her spontaneously. On others, she worked very hard, writing and rewriting, even up to sixteen pages for the draft of a single poem, especially when she was refining her craft at the Radcliffe Institute (deNiord, 2010, p. 50).

Stone viewed poems in two complementary ways: as emotional responses to the wounds the poet experiences in this life and as dramatic stories. She told J. F. Battaglia:

I think poems are closer to your mad reactions to life. Also to the self, the wounded. I think a lot of poetry comes out of wounds. I'm sure stories do too, but actually fiction for me is objective because I think that fiction automatically became for me the observed Other. Poetry, as your own emotional outcries, is more personal. Poetry comes more out of the self; fiction is the self observing....

I realize that I'm probably also a prose writer, because that's what I've been reading for over seventy years: You can see it in the poetry—that I'm a storyteller. And I see that I'm constantly collecting people as characters and seeing situations that are happening in an art form, or dialogue and so forth that just fascinates me. You know, I constantly see people that way. I see everything dramatically.

This perspective on her identity as poet and storyteller can explain the impulse toward lyrical and narrative forms so often seen in Stone's poems. It also provides context for an otherwise shocking statement that she made late in life: "I've never thought of myself as a poet. Never" (deNiord, 2010, p. 50). For though Stone became well-regarded for her accomplishments in poetry, two of her earliest publications were short stories: "The Secret Profession," published in *Commentary* in 1955, and "The Hedgerows in England," published in the *New Yorker* in 1962.

FICTION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In Stone's short story "The Secret Profession," her protagonist, Margery, is a woman married to

a novelist and professor of Eastern College, Dr. Henry Freed. They have two daughters, one of whom is named Elizabeth. Margery writes privately, with a small group of five others, but wishes for a wider audience. One day, while working in her garden, she is interrupted by a thirty-year-old German Jewish man named Mr. Harrison Finebein. He is looking for a job as a teacher or a librarian. He says he writes and shows Margery a long list of his works. He mentions he gets by on his savings, as a single man, but that he is also working on a grant. He had tried to get into graduate school at the University of Chicago, but he was not successful. He repeats the same things over and over again, and his mannerisms are disturbing. When Margery politely inquires about his parents, he says they are dead and adds, "They cooked them"—a clear allusion to the Holocaust. Margery gasps in surprise, but Mr. Finebein changes the subject to her garden.

Margery offers him flowers, accidentally failing to remove a white one that has died from the bouquet, which offends her visitor. She then phones her husband to arrange coffee for the three of them. Henry is irritated that she has called and interrupted his work at the college, but she insists that she needs his help to get rid of the visitor. She warns her husband that Mr. Finebein seems to be paranoid and insane—and that he is a writer.

Margery drives to the college with Mr. Finebein, but when the two of them arrive, Henry takes the driver's seat. The Freed and Mr. Finebein proceed to the coffee shop, where their interactions are awkward. Margery complains of a headache, and Mr. Finebein interprets her illness as dislike of his company, which Margery denies (but the reader suspects he may have overheard her harsh estimation of his character when she was speaking about him on the phone to her husband). Margery asks Mr. Finebein what Germany was like under Hitler. He replies, "Pure hell" and closes his eyes. Mr. Finebein mentions a Professor Goldmark, a Renaissance scholar, whose help he sought but did not obtain. He speculates that Goldmark, an Episcopalian, converted. "You're wrong," Henry says, "he's not a Jew." Mr. Finebein wonders aloud if he

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should convert, as if doing so might help him to obtain work. The Freeds do not answer him.

Instead, Henry reviews a list of Mr. Finebein's writings, and asks, "Any published?" Mr. Finebein does not answer the question, though earlier he had boasted to Margery that they were and that he had received awards for them. The Freeds watch their guest eat his strawberry ice cream, noticing that he laps up even the last pink drop of it. Margery begins to suspect that Mr. Finebein's list of publications is entirely made up.

After the Freeds drive Mr. Finebein to his rented place, the meeting ends on a cold note, as Henry says he will not be able to meet again for a few weeks. "Or next semester? Or next year?" Mr. Finebein asks sarcastically. The Freeds drive away, and Margery tells her husband that Mr. Finebein is angry, even furious—and that she does not believe he has written a line, "not a line." When her husband makes a sharp turn, and she is thrown against the passenger side of the car, she asks, "Why don't you learn how to drive?" That is the end of the story.

In the course of the narrative, it becomes apparent that the "secret profession" of the title is not writing, which all three main characters do to various extents, but lying. Mr. Finebein, a Holocaust survivor in America, lies to the Freeds because he desperately needs work. When Mr. Finebein says Margery dislikes his company, Margery disagrees: a polite lie. Henry also lies to Mr. Finebein when he says he cannot meet him again for a few weeks: a polite but clearly self-serving lie meant to help him avoid another uncomfortable encounter. Mr. Finebein is understandably angry. Meanwhile Margery, Stone tells us, "felt contaminated" and "a sense of universal failure welled up in her." The backdrop for these lies is, of course, the lies of Hitler and the tragedy of the Holocaust, which continue to play out in the postwar world of which the Freeds and Mr. Finebein are a part.

Like "The Secret Profession," Stone's story "The Hedgerows in England" explores the dynamics of lying. In "Hedgerows," Mrs. Stanley has accompanied her husband, Dr. Stanley, an assistant professor of English literature, to Cam-

bridge, England, for his sabbatical from Eastern College, which is located in New York. They have brought with them their three daughters, Edith, Fanny, and Annabel. The action of the story begins when Mrs. Stanley meets an old woman crossing the street who tells her that her aunt broke her hip stepping off a bus and died in bed; the old woman, who had been a young woman at the time and engaged to be married, had not cared for her aunt despite the aunt's expectation that she would. This confession clearly makes Mrs. Stanley uncomfortable, and she disengages herself from the old woman so she can continue to the silver stall in the local market.

There she is persuaded to buy a teakettle warmer, being told it is made of melted bell metal (though she suspects it is brass), and two spoons supposedly from the time of Queen Anne. She spends more for these items than she can really afford, even though she suspects she is being overcharged because she is an American. She wants these antiques; she wants part of the history of England to keep.

Later she goes for a walk with her husband in the gardens at Christ's College, though she feels cold and does not want to go. She pays attention to the gardeners at work and then to a robin, but her husband talks about Milton and later takes her picture in front of a 350-year-old mulberry tree not far from the bust of the seventeenth-century poet. They separate: he to the library, she to the butcher's. They plan to reunite for tea later.

At home, Mrs. Stanley meets her daughters with her silver treasures in tow: the youngest, Annabel, is jealous that her mother bought something for herself but not for her; the eldest, Edith, likes the tea warmer, but when the middle child, Fanny, says she does not, Edith advises her to go back to her artwork. Her husband arrives and complains about the tea and the peanut butter sandwiches his wife is serving. The daughters complain about difficulties they are having with teachers and friends at school. It seems they miss their life in New York just as their mother does. Mrs. Stanley decides to share the victory of the spoons with her family. As they admire them, she

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checks their markings against her book on English silver—only to discover that they are most certainly not from Queen Anne’s era. “That isn’t the seventeenth century,” her husband remarks (p. 141). Instead, the spoons appear to date to 1903. The silver, Mrs. Stanley notices, is scratched.

Her husband mentions how the library at Cambridge has all the books he had been wanting for his research. As he talks, Mrs. Stanley thinks about her garden and remembers lines from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1858 poem “The Courtship of Miles Standish”: “I have been thinking all day, dreaming all night and thinking all day, of the hedgerows of England—they are in blossom now, and the country is all like a garden.” To her husband, Mrs. Stanley says aloud, “Yes, I know, and I’m glad we came” (p. 141). Her words are clearly untrue, for she has been cold all day and wishing for her own garden at home in New York. She is lying to her husband just as the silver-sellers at the market lied to her. The irony of her response, however, is much deeper.

Both of Ruth Stone’s published short stories are forms of thinly veiled autobiography. Stone is the inspiration for the protagonists, Margery Freed and Mrs. Stanley, both of whom are gardeners, professors’ wives, and mothers; notably, Margery Freed is a writer, and Mrs. Stanley has her picture taken by her husband. Walter Stone is clearly the inspiration for the protagonists’ husbands, Dr. Henry Freed and Dr. Stanley, who are both professors at “Eastern College” (i.e., Vassar College) who write and/or study literature. Stone’s daughters are inspirational too: Marcia is the model for Edith (and possibly Elizabeth in “The Secret Profession”); Phoebe for Fanny; and Abigail for Annabel. The settings, New York and England, roughly correspond to Ruth Stone’s lived experience; the plots may as well. The stories may be compared fruitfully with the transcripts and recordings of the many interviews Stone gave over the years. Together, the stories and the interviews form Ruth Stone’s autobiography and reveal her thoughts and feelings about her life at different points in time.

In 1999 Stone published a third story, which could be considered either a prose poem or flash fiction: “In the Arboretum” (*Ordinary Words*, pp. 44–45). The protagonist is once again Ruth Stone, speaking *in propria persona*, and she is taking a walk on the redwood-forested grounds where she is living as an artist in residence when she hears a male owl, then she sees a fledgling hawk down: “Totally vulnerable, with its terrible innocence, it cannot feed itself. It cannot fly yet. It has this brief corridor to cross” (p. 44). As she walks and collects a few eucalyptus leaves, Stone remembers an eight-year-old girl in Vermont who was raped and strangled, her body abandoned in the fields until the members of her impoverished community went out to find it. When she retraces her steps, Stone says, “I look for the hawk child. She is gone” (p. 45). “In the Arboretum” is a short, powerful narrative that combines Stone’s attentiveness to the viciousness of predator and prey in the natural world with a critique of social injustice.

SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

Stone’s poetry, like her prose, is deeply influenced by her perceptions of nature. Stone was a gardener all her life, and perhaps in part for that practical reason, nature, in Stone’s poems, is rarely idealized. Instead, she examines it with a poetic microscope, writing of the unification of egg and sperm, and with a poetic telescope, writing of planets, stars, and cosmic events across the whole of the scientifically studied galaxy. Her reflections on events in the natural world can be ironic, or turn to social commentary, or even turn away from nature to human impositions on landscape, as when she writes in “Don’t Miss It”: “If you’re looking for a heron on one leg, / for a white egret in this water-logged parcel, / you may be blind to boarded-up gas pumps” (*In the Next Galaxy*, p. 48). Her critical eye evaluates decay in nature, considering its harshness, as in her meditation on a dead female mole infested with maggots (“The System,” *What Love Comes To*, p. 252). Occasionally, she describes nature in spiritually transcendent terms, as in “Eta Carinae,” in which she writes of giant stars in a

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nearby galaxy: “The supernovae, like Christ / come to illuminate the ignorant” (*What Love Comes To*, p. 24).

Stone’s poetry is full of responses to nature, but not in a Romantic vein; her work does not seem to be strongly influenced by either the English or the American poetic tradition. She said that she avoided reading the work of other poets because she did not wish to be influenced by them. Instead, she wanted to develop her own style and focus on her own content. Reading her poetry, anyone can see that she achieved her goal, for her allusions to other poets and poems are few and far between. Yet at various times throughout her life, Stone mentioned her early knowledge of the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, her natural sense of empathy with Emily Dickinson (Gilbert, p. 56), and her admiration of Gerard Manley Hopkins and “his ideas about stretching the line” (Bradley, p. 74). Emily Dickinson in particular was an important foremother-poet for Ruth Stone.

In 1998 Stone participated in a project of the Dickinson Electronic Archives (hosted by Amherst College) called *Titanic Operas*. The project gathers the prose and poetic responses of twenty-six American women poets to the legacy of Emily Dickinson. Stone wrote a brief statement paying tribute to Dickinson for the project:

When I read Emily Dickinson’s poems, these original hard as steel poems, and I feel the intensity in every word, words used in new ways, beat to her will, then I think she was self-sufficient, an artist whose mind was never asleep, whose concentration recreated, made fresh, all that she saw and felt, as though she saw through the ordinary barriers not as a visionary but as a laser beam. But when I think of how little recognition she received in her lifetime, and how devastated she must have felt, though her fierce pride concealed it, then I am angry and sad. Yes, a great artist knows and can work in almost total isolation, but it is a terrible thing to have to do. The original mind seems eccentric, even crazy sometimes. In her cryptic inventions, she broke the tiresome mold of American poetry. We still stand among those shards and splinters.

(“Breaking the Tired Mold of American Poetry”)

In the electronic archive, this statement is followed by a few poems by Emily Dickinson,

which Stone considers one by one, and then by twelve of Stone’s own poems. There is an audio file of the whole as well as an electronic transcript. Stone’s contribution constitutes an electronic chapbook of her own work, even as it pays homage to Emily Dickinson. Stone admired some twentieth-century poets as well.

In discussing her own vital use of the image (Bradley, p. 75), Stone has suggested her philosophical connections to certain Imagist poets, including those whom she mentions by name: Wallace Stevens (“Words,” *Ordinary Words*, p. 3), e. e. cummings, and Edna St. Vincent Millay (the latter two both in “Fragrance,” *What Love Comes To*, p. 45). She complained about Ezra Pound and his negative impact on H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) (Battaglia, 1996), emphasizing the importance of having freedom to write poetry however it comes, irrespective of rules. Stone also indicated her affinity for the work of Alicia Ostriker.

When asked, Alicia Ostriker reflected on the similarities her poetry has with that of Ruth Stone:

I am tickled that Ruth sees me as aligned with her. Here’s what I think we have in common. We are both unabashed lovers of life, which includes sex and children. We both have a sense of humor. We both have a strain of rationalism and science in our work. We are realistic about relationships—which forms a big topic for us—we are feminists but not separatists; we both like a conversational style (though I sometimes write more lyrically). I think there is a straight-forwardness about us both (interview 4/00).

(qtd. in Wheler)

Ostriker is one of many American poets who has read Stone’s work with respect and sensitivity to her themes.

In addition to Alicia Ostriker, the poet and literary critic Sandra Gilbert has long expressed admiration for the work of Ruth Stone; indeed, Gilbert has been one of Stone’s champions. She actively promoted Stone’s career by interviewing her, facilitating her employment as a visiting poet at the University of California, Davis, and co-editing (with Wendy Barker) a book of critical essays on her poetry as well as choosing her for

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the National Book Award for her poetry collection *Ordinary Words*. The importance of Sandra Gilbert in Stone's career has been vital, and Stone acknowledged this: she dedicated one of her poetry collections, *Second-Hand Coat*, to, among others, Sandra Gilbert and her husband Elliot, whom she called "my brilliant, enduring friends."

Stone's dedications of her poetry collections give insight into those who formed her inner circle and inspired her the most. Her first collection, *In an Iridescent Time*, was dedicated to her husband Walter and paid tribute to the collegiate community that they shared at Vassar College. Her second collection, *Topography and Other Poems*, was dedicated to seven people, many of whom had acted as patrons and promoters of Stone's poetry: Constance Smith, director of the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study; Jean and Frank White, Margaret and Leslie Fiedler, and Alice McIntyre; and Dr. Maxie Maulsby, Jr. Stone dedicated *Cheap: New Poems and Ballads*, her third full poetry collection, to "the countless women I respect and admire, and especially Marcia Stone Croll, Phoebe Stone, and Blue Jay Stone, my incomparable daughters." She dedicated subsequent collections to her daughters as well. Stone's beloved daughters clearly inspired her.

Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected was dedicated not only to the Elliots but to her grandchildren, Nora Swan Croll, Ehsan Jessie Croll, Ethan David Carlson, Hillery Ruth Stone, Bianca Rose Stone, and Walter Joseph Stone. In naming her grandchildren in her dedication, Stone pointed to her dual legacy as both a poet and as a mother and grandmother, the matriarch of a growing family. She also dedicated the book to William B. Goodman, "editor and friend."

Stone's daughter Phoebe played a special role in illustrating, with her own artwork, *Who Is the Widow's Muse?*, which is an extraordinary series of poems. Stone dedicated *Who Is the Widow's Muse?* to "Kandace Lombard, who asked the question," for as a student, Kandace Brill Lombard met Stone once when Stone was giving a poetry reading at a conference in Buffalo, New York, and she asked her the question that titles the collection. Lombard subsequently wrote the

first doctoral dissertation about Stone (2002), under the direction of Leslie Fiedler at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Lombard had already published an essay about Stone, titled "Under the Seal of My Widowhood," in the critical volume edited by Gilbert and Barker (1996).

Stone dedicated her Pushcart Prize-winning volume *Simplicity* (1995) to Ingrid Arnesen, Deborah Campbell, and Jan Freeman, whom she called "my poetry daughters." One of these women, Jan Freeman, wrote a critical essay on Stone, which was published in 1996. Stone dedicated *Ordinary Words* to "my beautiful daughters, Marcia, Phoebe, and Abigail." As Stone's sight began to fade and she struggled with partial blindness from a botched surgery, her daughters helped her prepare new poetry manuscripts for publication with Copper Canyon Press, and she acknowledged their help in dedications to the books. She dedicated *In the Next Galaxy* (2004) to Abigail, saying, "During my recent loss of vision, she has provided the light," and *In the Dark* (2004) to Marcia and her granddaughter, the poet Nora Swan Croll, "who were my eyes for many months, reading aloud, transcribing from my notebooks, discussing, organizing, typing, and proofreading."

Stone dedicated *What Love Comes To: New & Selected Poems* (2008) to the memory of her son-in-law Don Croll, who passed away in the same year she published this book. This death impressed upon her once again the sorrow of loss. Stone wrote in the dedication: "To Don Croll, August 19, 1939 to January 11, 2008: Beloved father of my grandchildren Nora Swan, Jesse Ehsan, and Sahara Najat; world traveler, lover of the Persian language, and my dear friend for over fifty years.' She added an epitaph, four lines of poetry from Edward Fitzgerald's late-nineteenth-century translation *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*: "For some we loved, the loveliest and the best / That from his Vintage rolling Time hath prest / Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before, / And one by one crept silently to rest." This dedication, like the others, reveals how important Stone's inner circle was to her life as a person as well as a poet.

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In her poems, it is apparent that Stone talks to herself, her younger self, or her body; Walter and her daughters; and members of her extended family, including her mother, father, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. But she also talks as if she were a ventriloquist, using dramatic monologue to give voice to the voiceless. In these poems, she speaks from the perspective of women who have struggled on the edges of American community (the most notable of which is certainly “The Song of Absinthe Granny”), but also from the perspectives of those who have judged these women unfairly (“How They Got Her to Quiet Down” and “Sleeping Beauty IV”). Stone consistently notices outsiders—at bus stops, on the street, in institutions—and she memorializes them in her poems. She compels readers to identify with these outsiders and thus to gain a deeper empathy with the poet’s vision.

Stone’s poetic vision of the world has been called “tragi-comic,” for her ironic sense of humor in the face of the brokenness of the world shines through her work. In her work, she treats many themes, including love and loss, poverty, the human body, relationships between men and women, the marginalized members of American communities, old age, the universe, and poetry itself. Her vision and themes perhaps can be best understood in the context of her view of the purpose of poetry: to bring about healing. In her interview with J. F. Battaglia, she said:

Having children be encouraged to write how they feel and how they respond to the world, that’s a wonderful thing, and it’s also giving them an idea that poetry is not all something that they are taught—this is a poem and this is what it means, et cetera—which was a dreadful way of teaching poetry—but that it’s the right of every human being. Poetry, in many ways, is an expression of the psyche. Maybe it’s the wounded [psyche] inside us, as well as the joyous. I remember little children in—maybe it was here in Middlebury, or down in Maryland—but I asked them to write about something that they miss. Well, several of them wrote about loss, the loss of grandparents, of friends, or animals, and so forth—you know, all kinds of painful loss—and they were little kindergarten ones. Wonderful things they wrote. Expressions of art in all forms, but especially language, is healing.

As these words suggest, Stone believed that poetry could bring healing to poets, including children, and she was concerned with passing on a poetic legacy to the next generation. But to Stone, poetry not only brought about healing. As she used to say, sometimes in the middle of department meetings, “Poetry saves lives!” (as noted by Liz Rosenberg, qtd. in “Professor Emerita Ruth Stone”).

LEGACY

Ruth Stone died on November 18, 2011, and she was given a green burial by her family: buried behind her house in Goshen, Vermont, under raspberry canes, with no grave marker. Versions of her obituary appeared in major newspapers across the United States, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Guardian*, among many others. Her daughter Phoebe wrote a beautiful and moving tribute to her several months after her death that recalled Stone not only as a poet but also as a mother and a gardener.

Stone’s legacy lives on in many ways: in her daughters and granddaughters, some of whom have become writers themselves, and in her students and colleagues, many of whom have been inspired by her. The essay collection *The House Is Made of Poetry* (1996), edited by Wendy Barker and Sandra M. Gilbert, celebrates Stone’s poetic achievement, as does volume 27 of *Paintbrush: A Journal of Poetry and Translation*, which was entirely dedicated to her work. The Vermont College of Fine Arts has established an annual award in her name, the Ruth Stone Poetry Prize, and the Ruth Stone Foundation exists to protect and promote her work as well as her farmhouse home in Vermont.

In her lifetime, Stone published her poems in over fifty anthologies. Stone also recorded her poems on many separate occasions, so her voice can be heard in recorded interviews and YouTube video clips as well as in the film *USA the Movie* (2005), reading her poem, “Be Serious.” Her voice will live on for future generations because her poetry has an extraordinary quality to it, which demands our attention, especially in dif-

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ficult times. As Stone herself said in her acceptance speech for the National Book Award:

I think that poetry rises especially in times of oppression, like in Yugoslavia, where it became a great thing for the oppressed recently and what seems recently to me. Of course, all of the arts, everything that the wonderful human mind does is, is important. I do want to say that, printing and the publishers are utterly important. I mean, sometimes you may think they do it for money, but they don't make that much money. So I also want to say, bless the publishers, bless the people who read and who push their children to read, because reading, it seems to me, I know it's a recent thing, that we didn't used to read, but it was a concrete event, it really was, and I also want to say a blessing to Gutenberg. That's who we owe it to, don't we? Thank you.

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