Poetic Tone: How Tone Indicators and Imagery Move a Poem Forward

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Abstract

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Creative Writing

Unlike most poetic glossary terms, *tone* seems to remain an elusive craft element. Many definitions all circle around the same general idea, though, which seems to be that *tone* comes from the "inner voice" of the poet and deals in indicating emotional stakes and emotional intention of the lines in a poem. Though stable tone (the use of a singular tone throughout a poem) is a valid poetic technique, this essay intends to demonstrate, by using the work of James Tate and James Schuyler, that poems employing a multiplicity of tone lend to dense, emotionally rich, propelling work that keeps the readers interested and invested. By using indicators and imagery, tone shifts from line to line, and the reader is kept engaged and curious as to what comes next.

Of all poetic concepts and techniques that have been identified and given names and definitions, *tone* remains as one of the most difficult to pin down in any concrete way. If we were to investigate the myriad of definitions posited by academics and poets alike, then we would still be unsure of what exactly the proper definition for *tone* would be. For example, Ed Hirsch wrote that the poetic concept of *tone* is "borrowed from the expression *tone of voice* and thus implies something said aloud" and that "tone is all in the inflection, how a thing is said, or seems to be said" (Hirsch, 641). It seems that understanding *tone* is rooted in the way things sound to the ear, but because poetry is often absorbed in written word, Hirsch suggests the audible, "spoken intonations must be inferred by readers, who hear the tones win an inner ear" (Hirsch, 641). But *tone* doesn't just refer to the way the voice sounds in the reader's head or when spoken aloud. *Tone* is "generally taken to indicate a writer or speaker's sense of his situation," meaning *tone* is more of a "complex of attitudes toward a subject, by determining how a speaker takes himself, and, more complicatedly, how the poet takes his speaker, [and how these stances affect the reader]. This includes determining a speaker's attitude toward her subject (what she is addressing) as well as toward her audience (whom she is addressing)" than anything completely linked to sonic inflections and spoken intonations (Hirsch, 641). In other words, *tone* seems to be the attitudes and emotions the poem, poet, and speaker are dealing with in relation to the content of the poem itself.

This definition seems reasonable so far, other than the fact that Hirsch himself accepts that "tonal range is vast and sometimes difficult to determine — is it aggrieved, beseeching, curious, determined, elevated, furious… many of these things at once" and thus a hard concept to identify and pin down when reading poetry (Hirsch, 641). This is where the question arises of how to identify when a poem is employing a variety of tones at once. Here is where Tony

Hoagland comes in with his essay "Sad Anthropologists: Stable, Dialectical, and Dialogic Use of Tone." It is in this essay that Hoagland identifies that good poetry often deals with a multiplicity of tones simultaneously, and that identifying how these tones manifest and interact is paramount to understanding tone as a concept in its entirety.

In his essay, Hoagland identifies a handful of methods and techniques that poets employ to create tone. He begins by agreeing with Hirsch, reinforcing that "tone communicates attitude, it is the way one senses the stake of engagement" within the poem, but reminds us that "tone is an ambient, fluid, and internal quality in writing, one constructed from so many shifting elements" (Hoagland, 1). In order to better hone in on tone as a concept, Hoagland delves deeper into this ambient, fluid, and shifting elements of tone, establishing what he refers to as "dialectical tone." In defining dialectical tone, Hoagland introduces "fractions" (though math should not be involved in poetry) in order to simplify the concept. Hoagland argues that tonally rich poems employ a "layered, rhythmic management of inflection and emphasis" and that these layers manifest in an A/B in terms of numerator and denominator (Hoagland, 4). These fractions are a simplified way of demonstrating this concept, and he goes on to state that the dominant and subordinate tones are "both multiple and distinct; nearly simultaneous, they are hidden inside each other, fused and amalgamated," but the concept remains that a powerful poem employs multiple tonal ideations throughout its movement, stanzas, and even in individual lines (Hoagland, 5).

In order to demonstrate this concept and understanding of tone, I will be demonstrating the multiplicity of tone in two of the great Jameses of American poetry; Tate and Schuyler. To begin, we will look at James Tate. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Tate himself said "I love my funny poems, but I'd rather break your heart. And if I can do both in the same poem, that's

the best" (Simic). Without delving into any of this, we already understand the poet's desire to reach the reader at a variety of emotional levels. In order to achieve this goal of laughter then tears in his work, Tate bases his language is "on non-sequiturs, contradictions, literalized figures of speech, episodic detail from partially erased narratives, false casualties, associative leaps, askew parallelisms, and a whole tangle of other dismantling strategies" in order to create tonally rich poems in which each line propels the reader to continue on till the end, despite the often surreal and absurd content generated from his use of language (Jackson, 1). To demonstrate his ability to use tone as a propellant, we will look at Tate's poem "It's Not the Heat So Much as the Humidity," originally published in 1970, in his second book *The Oblivion Ha-ha*.

In starting this poem Tate begins as he often does, with something seemingly regular. The lines:

> Only a dish of blueberries could pull me
> out of this lingering funk.
> I'm tired of taking the kids down (1-3)

immediately give the reader a sense of dejection. In relation to the title, the reader infers that the speaker has had it with the wet heat of summer. It's important to note that Tate chose to title the poem with a commonly spoken phrase in language, this gives the poem common ground, an entry point for the reader. But, as we will see as the reader moves forward, Tate chose this phrase for the title to help provide a basis of expectations to subvert. The reader is in a state of understanding that the tone of dejection in the poem comes from the wet hot days of summer, but Tate will eventually subvert these notions with the images and events that take place later in the poem. "Lingering funk" cues the reader towards ideations of a persistent heat wave and the weight of exhaustion from non-stop sweat from the sweltering heat of the sun. There is almost a

sense of desperation in wanting something as simple as blueberries in order to obtain any kind of solace. We also note that this is a father figure, worn out by the tasks of entertaining children. In these three lines, Tate has indicated that the speaker is exhausted, dejected, irritable, and even a little desperate.

Continuing, we might expect the destination of the speaker and the kids to lead to somewhere refreshing like a community pool, somewhere to take refuge from the weather. But, as Tate is wont to do, he subverts the expectations set by his lines:

> to watch the riot, no longer impressed
> with fancy electrical nets, sick
> of supersonic nightsticks. (4-6)

The anticipation of the quotidian has been shattered, yet there still remains a sense of satisfaction in where Tate takes us. Heatwaves are known to stir up feelings of aggression and irritation and historically have led to riots in many cities across the United States, and this tone of aggression is highlighted in his description. There is a bit of sarcasm hinted at in the adjectives Tate uses. *Fancy* and *supersonic* imply a tone of fascination with the brutality and violence that the police would use in response to the rioters. This sarcasm shows that the speaker remains dejected, as they are no longer impressed by the riot's violence and spectacle.

Still in search of solace, Tate continues in making the absurd seem normal. His speaker, at the spectacle of this heatwave riot, treats the event like a regular day at the ballpark:

> Buy myself a hot dog and a glass of beer—
> that helps. It's hard to say
> who's winning. Nobody is winning. (7-9)

In getting to this image, we can return to the previous stanza, where, when working associationally, the reader can liken the nets to gloves and the nightsticks to bats. Here Tate helps

ground the previous absurdity in a moment of realism by providing images that allow the reader to associate the spectacle of the riot with something more universally understood. Was the previous "riot" no more than a baseball game? It is hard to say for sure, ambiguity and obscuring the truth are essential pillars of Tate's work. Either way, this stanza propels the tone of dejection toward complete defeat. In his line breaks, Tate simultaneously indicates that both the beer and hotdog fail in providing solace from the heat, and that even the riot (or baseball game) have become obscured by the heat of the summer. In not knowing who is winning, the speaker realizes that, in this shared misery, "nobody is winning" (Tate 9). The speaker seems to have been defeated by the heat and the failure to find solace, and the spectacle was all for naught.

Suddenly, however, the tone jumps up to a heightened sense of excitement:

> Boy, Kansas City! Big Zoo! Oriental art!
> Starlight Theater: *Annie Get Your Gun*
> going into its seventeenth year. (10-12)

Here the speaker (and the poet) seem to be relishing their hometown. However, the second and third line of this stanza indicate a different sense. The tone of excitement's wind is taken out of the sails and instead replaced with a tone of mockery. The same musical being performed for seventeen years and a big zoo aren't much to brag about in the grand scheme of exciting things found in a city. After mocking the city with this tone of sarcasm, the speaker takes one more stab at making Kansas City seem like something:

> Once I met Tab Hunter there, four o'clock
> in the morning, standing in line
>
> at the Coke machine, so tall and blond,
> though not much of a conversationalist. (13-16)

Introducing Tab Hunter, an actor and singer known as a heart-throb during his time, brings a bit of glitz and glamor to this dreary Kansas City summer and reintroduces that momentary tone of excitement that Tate brought up in the previous lines. There is an underlying implication of pride in his description of the occasion. Stated plain and simple, *the* Tab Hunter was at a regular Coke machine in regular Kansas City. This description is immediately undercut by the fact that the famous actor wasn't much of a conversationalist, which shatters the illusion of grandeur that people often impart on celebrities. It becomes clear that Tate, though he set this interaction up as something potentially incredible, uses the humor of the boring celebrity to return to the mocking tone in regards to Kansas City. What could have been an interesting interaction is diminished into something more of a mundane, insincere passing. After all of this, the poem returns to its sense of dejection and defeat.

With this tone reassured, our speaker continues on in his musing of his home:

> It's good to be home, trying to soften
> The blow for young girls who are inclined
> To fall off their porches.
>
> Some of my best friends are …
> Curse on those who do or do not take dope. (17-21)

The first three lines remind us of the previous sarcasm that Tate has used in this poem. "It's good to be home" is stated ironically, although it takes the next two lines for this to become apparent (Tate 17). At first it seems that the speaker is being honest; although the city has all its faults, it is home. It seems that the speaker is trying to soften the blow of the reminder that home isn't all that great, yet the following lines send us somewhere else. Something sinister arises in the mention of young girls falling off of porches, though Tate never illuminates why exactly this is happening. Here there is both a sense of the absurd and a sense of sadness. This ambiguous

sinister emotion is reinforced by the following couplet. The speaker begins to lament about best friends but cuts himself short. With a sarcastic "curse" of condemnation to those who do and those who don't take drugs, Tate indicates a tonal shift into that of loss. The city has claimed loved ones and the heat still looms over the speaker like a sadness that weakens the spirit to a sense of apathy.

Almost immediately, however, Tate gives the poem "hope:"

> When Autumn comes, O when Fall arrives,
> in her chemise of zillion colors,
> I will sigh noisily, as if an old and
> Disgusting leg had finally dropped off. (22-25)

The speaker and the poem are waiting in anticipation for relief from both the heat (and the misery) of the summer and the loss of family (though this loss isn't fully alluded to until the end of the poem). In the first two lines of this stanza, Tate turns to a slightly higher diction, as if beginning an ode to the fall's beauty, indicated by the romantic *O*. This is what Hoagland refers to as "surrogate tone," meaning Tate is employing an elevated rhetoric usually found in older, romantic poetry, in an effort to "facilitate the expression of strong feeling" (Hoagland, 10). Here the *O* is employed ironically due to the anachronistic nature of the romantic language. Tate continues this ironic use of diction by immediately undercutting the language with *zillion*, a made-up number that downplays and re-grounds the poem in more modern language. Then, Tate inserts a surprising (and a bit disgusting) image in which the speaker likens the changing of the season to the loss of a "disgusting leg" falling off the body (Tate 25). The losing of the leg drops like the dead weight of the summer heat, a burden finally removed from the speaker's experience. The surprising necrotic leg interrupts the imagery of the autumn season with its myriad of color. This juxtaposition of the coming beauty of autumn and the dead-leg summer

helps move the poem, shifting the tone toward one of relief. The speaker has dropped dead weight, so to speak. For a brief moment the poem is repulsive, yet remains accurate in capturing the feeling of ridding the self with grief and depression. The speaker continues:

> No more drinking beer, no more
> the perpetual search for an air-
> conditioned friend, no more friends. (26-28)

With his hope of relief from the wet heat with the coming fall, we see a short catalog of the speaker's usual searchings for solace. And it all seems well and good; no more cold beer to stave off the weight of life and the heat, no more desperately looking for air conditioners and seeking out friends in hopes of using their air. Yet the speaker ends on a sour note, turning to complete isolation. There still remains an underlying sense of desperation for solace from depression.

The speaker returns, however, to hope for the coming cool of Autumn:

> I'll take piano lessons. French lessons,
> speed-reading lessons, and if there is
> still time to kill, gawk at a bluejay
> Tumbling out of the maple tree. (29-32)

The first line of this stanza is rooted in self improvement. Piano and French lessons would serve to benefit the speaker who intends to reinvigorate their life once the summer comes to an end. As the stanza continues, though, Tate indicates that perhaps the speaker is not so well intentioned with their hopes of lessons. Speed-reading serves to indicate that perhaps these serve more as distractions, which is reinforced with "if there is/ still time to kill" (Tate30-31). Here the speaker is shown as filling time, not enjoying time, with activities that while generally considered "good" in a time-management sense, are actually detrimental. In a world in which efficiency of production is valued, the sacrifice of genuinely taking the time to read a piece of literature is considered a waste. The speaker will only enjoy the beauty of life, nature, and art if his

distractions lend him a sliver of time left in the day and are considered “good things” only in a conventional sense. There still remains a sense of sadness underneath the speaker’s desire for the cooler seasons. The poem continues:

> Cars slide by with their windows up,
> Whispering of a Mexican Restaurant
> “with really good Chili Verde.” (33-35)

Tate has directed us to a sense of isolation. The speaker, who earlier in the poem called for “no more friends” now finds himself alone on the street listening to tidbits of conversation (Tate 28). The speaker has been cut off from his fellow Kansas Citians, separated by car windows and the low hush of whispers. The speaker won’t know of this Mexican restaurant as anything more than a rumor due to the isolation and separation between the speaker and society. Of course, there’s an underlying sense of self-deprecating humor. In his description, Tate has created what seems to be a secret society that carries rumors of hidden Mexican restaurants. The occupants of the car are whispering, which indicates a slightly absurd notion that there is some sort of collusion to keep the speaker isolated from the local eateries in the city. Even the chili verde is only “very good.” Tate’s choice in simple diction here emphasizes the fabricated “others” that the speaker is imagining in the passing cars. In his efforts to escape the heat, the speaker feels they’re removed from the kids, their friends, and Kansas City life itself, though it very well may be his own doing.

This is where the tone of the poem shifts entirely. So far, Tate has woven bits of hope, humor, wanting, and excitement throughout his lines. But now what remains is a true sense of loss, isolation, and depression:

> The gutters billow with mauve death:
> a mother’s sad voice sends out
> a tugboat whistle through the purple mist:
> she worries about her children. (36-39)

This stanza in particular is dense with tonal indicators that shift the poem towards a sense of darkness. The gutters, mauve death, mist, worry, and children all indicate to the reader the immense sorrow that this stanza points to. This mother, worried about her children, could be in reference to the "young girls who are inclined/ to fall off their porches," or it could be Kansas City itself, lamenting about the effects of the summer and the 1960s on Americans in the Midwest (Tate 18-19). Either way, Tate has effectively shifted the tone of this poem to that of darkness and sorrow. This continues on into the next stanza, in which Tate uses "an unstated figure of speech [to] link [his] seemingly unconnected perceptions" (Chiasson). The following stanza:

> And the dangerous fishhook of melancholy
> Dangles from every dog's ear.
> The dog that saved my life,
> that keeps on saving it each long, humid night.
> The dead dog. And so: (40-44)

works directly with the figure of speech "the dog days of summer." The dog days of summer are known in the Northern Hemisphere to be the hottest of the season, and are connected with lethargy, intense heat, thunderstorms, bad luck, and fever. Tate acknowledges the overall themes and tones of the poem; the melancholy (that he outright states), misery, lethargy, and hopelessness that the intense heat of the late summer brings. But again, as he has throughout the poem, Tate still weaves in a sense of hope. This dog, the dog days of summer, still saves the speaker and keeps saving the speaker. There is a relation between the passing of these days and the will to go on. As each night comes to an end, the speaker moves forward to the next day, and so on. Though Tate then ends the stanza abruptly with "The dead dog" (Tate 44). This sudden shift reminds the reader of the looming sense of dejection and loss that permeates throughout the

poem. It's possible that Tate is referencing either a memory of a dog or an actual dog, as earlier in the poem, the speaker begins (but cuts short) a lament about the loss of a friend in the line "Some of my best friends are…" (Tate 20). Whether the dog is real or not, the speaker's undercutting of the "savoir" dog by stating it's dead surprises the reader and shifts the tone of the poem to one of uncertainty. Perhaps all that has preceded is steeped in confusion, considering the speaker's faith in the dead dog. Perhaps the heat and humidity have muddled the speaker's senses, and left them in a state of delusion. Either way, the dog is dead in the sense that the dog days are passing, and the cool weather may be on the horizon, if we are still to trust the speaker's sensibilities.

In the last stanza and final line, Tate uses one of his typical techniques of "weird juxtaposition[s] of disparate images" to bring the poem to a conclusion (Gioia):

> a shiny baseball hovers over the city.
> No one asks why. And so: it passes on.
> And so: a telephone starts to ring
> in a window's cake-filled kitchen…
>
> A roller skate collides with a lunchpail. (45-49).

The imagery of the riot from the first stanza, which was compared to that of a baseball game, returns here with the baseball in the sky. This allusion to the previous image highlights the spectacle of the riot, something so casual in America that it becomes something of an event to witness, to sit back, watch, and have a beer. The baseball here also serves as a celestial being, a moon ignored by the masses. These riots and protests have become commonplace in the United States. Up above, in its seeming regularity, the residents of Kansas City, beaten down by the dog days of summer, don't think twice about its looming presence in the sky. Tate, a master at imagining the mundane as the insane, glosses over the strangeness of existence, and moves on.

The repetition of "And so" carries a tone of apathy, indifference, and disinterest with the goings on of this imagined city. These things are, whether the speaker cares or not, and they will be. The telephone will ring, and the rollerskate will clatter against the tin of a lunch pail. And so: this is life during the heat and humidity of the late summer.

As "It's Not the Heat So Much as the Humidity" has demonstrated, tone is something that, when employed properly, allows a poem to be rich and dense with a variety of emotional complexities which allow the reader to fully enter into the poem. Here we will now turn to another of the greats, James Schuyler. Unlike Tate, Schuyler is a poet more interested in centering his poetry in the regular, the grounded, and less so in great leaps, turns, and the absurdity of life. Schuyler delves into the regular beauty of life, the day to day, which he demonstrates in his poem "February," originally published in his first book of poetry *Freely Espousing*. In his poem, Schuyler "attempts to come up with an accurate description of 'the day,'" which, simply put, "is an attempt to nail down its mood" (Kaufmann, "Specimen Days"). To nail this shifting mood, Schuyler's poem employs a fluid sense of tone that captures the drifting eye, taking stock of both what exists in front of the speaker and what exists in his mind. He starts effortlessly; "A chimney, breathing a little smoke" (Schuyler 1). Schuyler's simplicity captures the early winter evening; the personified chimney breathes life and the beauty of life into the scene (a theme that recurs throughout the poem), the chimney reaches with its smoke into the sky, bridging the two planes. Coupled with the tone of serenity, the reader is clued into a feeling of peace. We are cozy, near the end of winter, and if the chimney is breathing smoke, then our fire is likely burning too.

Next Schuyler places himself into the poem:

> The sun, I can't quite see
> making a bit of pink

I can't quite see in the blue (3-4).

Tonally, there is a sense of uncertainty yet understanding, a false obscurity that exists to be uncovered by Schuyler's deep knowledge of the beauty of the world. The word *quite* exists as a tonal indicator to cue the reader into this simultaneous uncertainty and understanding. He knows the sun is beginning to set, and is anticipating the coming wash of color in the sky. As this poem continues, we see Schuyler's argument regarding seeing, meaning the speaker's view is unfolding with each line. Subjectivity shifts and varies as time and scene passes. For example, Schuyler can't quite see the sun, indicating that the sun is receding over the horizon, hiding behind early evening clouds, or obscured behind a building. The specifics are besides the point; what is important is his view of the sunset's light playing against the sky as the lines carry forward. Schuyler is a poet fascinated with the way light and color interact with each other and we see this demonstrated within these lines. "A bit of pink/ I can't quite see in the blue" shows the poet's immediate understanding of the way the early setting sun would cast light onto the sky (Schuyler 3-4). As both a critic and curator of art, Schuyler's ability to describe the colors he perceives allows the reader to (almost literally) paint the images he conjures in their minds.

In continuing, Schuyler associatively moves from one shade of pink to another. He turns his gaze to "The pink of five tulips/ at five p.m. on the day before March first" which takes us from the pale pink of an early winter sunset to the pale pink of tulips (Schuyler 5-6). Assumptions can be made about the color of the flowers and the date. Because pink tulips are often a symbol of affection and love we, as the readers, might develop ideas about what this poem will lead to, especially considering the association between the pink tulips and the title of the poem, "February." However, Schulyer seems to be skirting around this association, as this is not a poem to a lover, but a poem to life which becomes clearer as the poem continues. By

ignoring this common symbol association, the tone of uncertainty from the opening lines carries on. This is an important theme of the poem because, as we continue reading, we discover that Schuyler's intention is to behold the beauty of the day and how one day is much like any other, yet uniquely its own beautiful thing. It's this tone of ambiguity and uncertainty that propels the poem and the reader to continue on.

Schulyer now returns to color, "the green of the tulip stems and leaves" and carries the tone of uncertainty over to the following line with "like something I can't quite remember" (Schuyler 7-8). Here, Schuyler demonstrates one of his characteristic poetic methods, "browsing; he ruffles the pages in his head" (Kaufmann, "Days and Nights"). The color of the sky has moved him to the pink of the tulips and then to the green of the stems and then to some unknown memory. As he attempts to remember, another flower (one of Schuyler's obsessions) enters the poem. The memory that the green of the tulips reminds the speaker of is "finding a jack-in-the-pulpit/ a long time ago and far away" (Schuyler 9-10). With such a sudden introduction of a specific flower, the poet contrasts the previous line in which he can't quite remember. In his browsing, Schuyler has brought himself to some memory of a flower, reiterating the distance by emphasizing the time and physical distance separating the then and the now. This flower, with its striking name, not only comes associationally through color, but also serves to function as a demonstration of the mind. By going from obscurity to specificity, Schuyler zooms his poetic lens in while also demonstrating the way in which memory returns to a person's mind. While a lingering sense of uncertainty remains, there also lies a feeling of nostalgia that can't quite be placed in actual experience but rather in a distant memory of a specific flower. We can tell from the tone of these lines that this is not a bad memory, but something Schuyler is searching to look back on with fondness.

Suddenly, he remembers, “Why it was December then/ and the sun was on the sea/ by the temples we’d gone to see” (Schuyler 11-13). These three lines, dense with the pleasures of sound found in much of Schuyler’s work, place the memory for both the speaker and readers. Here a “we” enters the poem, the speaker is reminiscing, as indicated by the tone of these lines. Finally, Schuyler reveals the full memory spurred by the green color of the tulips’ stems. As readers we feel as if we are experiencing the memory as it happens. Continuing in his browsing of this memory, Schuyler remembers:

> One green wave moved in the violet sea
> like the UN Building on big evenings,
> green and wet
> while the sky turns violet (14-17).

He is painting again, his understanding of color and the way they interact has allowed his imagery to paint itself in the mind of the reader. Interestingly, Schuyler chooses to liken the sea to that of the UN Building, an imposing and somewhat authoritarian structure from his home of New York City. This is an indicator. While Schuyler is reminiscing, the introduction of the UN Building places the speaker back in New York and away from the temples. This reminds the reader that this poem is not about the love between the speaker and the other in the *we*, but in the beauty of the everyday. That being said, in his description he is accurate, the UN Building does loom like a wave crashing into the dusky sky. Its glossy windows tinted green reflect the light like that of the ocean. This demonstrates one of his fascinations, light and color interacting and influencing his perspective.

As he carries on, Schuyler again brings us to flowers:

> A few almond trees
> had a few flowers, like a few snowflakes
> out of the blue looking pink in the light. (18-20)

Here Schuyler's tone becomes grounded, isolated, and focused on the sparse. Juxtaposed against the grandiose of the green wave of a building clashing against the violet sea sky, Schuyler brings us to the small, the simple, the tiny flowers of an almond tree, pink like snowflakes reflecting light. In mentioning the colors blue and pink again, we see how Schuyler's poem unfolds, emanating all from the blue and pink barely seen in the sunset at the beginning of the poem. His use of repetition with the word *few* seems to reinforce a sense of beauty in the simplicity. Only a few blooming flowers remind him of a few snowflakes that appear "out of the blue" (Schuyler 20). This phrase alone captures much of Schuyler's poetic sensibility; the beauty in the unseen, ignored, and unappreciated. A few snowflakes littered from an otherwise sunny day would be nothing to think about, but to the poet, to Schuyler, they are a mark of beauty.

His next line is a turn from the previous themes. He starts with "A gray hush" and with this absence of color the tone of the poem changes momentarily (Schuyler 21). The gray hush gives the reader a sense of unease and feels like a mechanical interruption to the idyllic picture being painted in the previous lines. This idea is reinforced with the assertion from Schuyler that the hush comes from "boxy trucks roll[ing] up Second Avenue/ into the sky" (Schuyler 22-23). The anthropocene returns but, unlike the UN Building, these trucks don't garner the same beauty of description. Instead, it seems Schuyler himself was interrupted by the sight, and mentions "They're just/ going over the hill" (Schuyler 23-24). Perception becomes the central concern in these lines. From his point of view, the trucks seem to be bridging the gap between the earth and the sky (as the chimney's smoke did). Though, in using deft line breaks, Schuyler's surprising image of flying trucks is subverted by revealing that the road they drive on merely passes over a hill. Again, Schuyler is treating view and perception as something that happens in real time as opposed to an omniscient understanding often found in writing. The reader also might assume

that, due to the common saying “over the hill” in regards to age and eventual death, that Schuyler might be implying some kind of wish to end the trucks’ distraction in his “browsing” of his mind. These lines mark a momentary tonal shift in which Schuyler almost seems to lose his eternal love of the beauty of life or, at least for a brief moment, the poem seems distracted and even slightly annoyed.

Almost immediately, however, Schuyler brings himself back to his senses:

> The green leaves of the tulips on my desk
> like grass light on flesh,
> and a green-copper steeple
> and streaks of cloud beginning to glow. (25-28)

By returning to the tulips on his desk the tone of the poem shifts again away from distraction, and back towards the sublime and the reminiscent. Almost as if in his browsing, he recalls his attention to the joy he finds in the tulips and subsequently the joy he finds in other images that he locates using his associations. From the leaves of the tulips he returns to his obsessions of light and color and imagines the way the green light reflects off the blades and onto bare flesh lying in a bed of grass. Here again we can imagine the undertone of affection. As we (and Schuyler) know, pink tulips are often given as tokens of care and affection. To liken these flowers, these symbols of love, to the way light reflects and plays on flesh cues the reader into a recurring undertone found throughout the poem. As the speaker witnesses the beginning of the sunset, he is taken on a journey of association that leads from the sunset, to the distant memory of finding the jack-in-the-pulpit while on an outing with a beloved, back to the now. These descriptions are what carry the tone of affection that Schuyler so dearly wants to convey to the reader. The abstraction of symbolism is ignored for simple description, allowing the reader to experience the

tulips for themselves through the lyric in a more authentic manner, which in turn lets the reader see the world's beauty as Schuyler does.

The line following the light on flesh, "a green-copper steeple," tonally indicates the emotion of time passing (there seems to not be a word for this emotion, the awareness that time has passed) as the copper steeple has oxidized due to the passage of time. This indicates the beauty of age, which alludes back to the gray trucks going over the hill, as well as the passage of time felt through the relationship between Schuyler's memories and the present. Then the tone shifts to a sense of wonder that can only be explained by stating the line; "streaks of cloud beginning to glow" (Schuyler 28). This wonder that fills someone upon seeing the sunset light the remaining clouds in the dusk sky is nigh impossible to capture in words and yet Schuyler has done so and he himself seems at disbelief. "I can't get over/ how it all works in together" (Schuyler 29-30). The poem, tonally, is in a state of disbelief both with its own deftness at capturing the beauty of the February sunset and the beauty itself. Schuyler has found a way to say so much with so little.

As the poem continues, Schuyler brings back the notion of life existing around the perspective of the poem. Like the image of the breathing chimney, a woman and baby enter the poem in order to remind the reader that the beauty of life is what matters in this poem.

> like a woman who just came to her window
> and stands there filling it
> jogging her baby in her arms. (31-33).

Here there is a sense of bliss shown through the mother and young baby. Schuyler describes the mother as filling the window, using words to capture the glowing of a new mother. The scene is heartwarming, enough to stave off the cold approaching winter night in the northeast. Schuyler's skill in choosing verbs is also at play here. *Jogging* gives the poem a sense of movement,

propelling the reader forward. But next Schuyler distances them, “She’s so far off” (Schuyler 34). Tonally, a sense of longing enters, if only for a second. Stating the distance between the speaker and the mother creates distance for the reader and the poem, putting the reader outside of the content, creating a sense of spatial uncertainty. In his poetry Schuyler often jumps from the near to the distant. This allows the poet to both put into perspective the scale of the imagery and also call into question a sense of uncertainty. In this instance, he intends to contrast the intimacy of the mother and child with the distance of the observer. By highlighting this distance, Schuyler is able to shift his attention again to perception, to the light playing on the baby, “Is it the light/ that makes the baby pink?” (Schuyler 34-35). This takes us back to the sunset, back to the tulips, back to the light that shines on Schuyler’s beautiful landscape. The tone of wonder returns, bringing us back to the “streaks of cloud beginning to glow” (Schuyler 28). Is it the light that gives the baby a pink hue of life? Is it life itself that casts colors on the skin of an innocent newborn? Is it love of the new mother that makes the baby pink? These are the questions of wonder that Schuyler asks through the tone of his singular question.

After distancing himself and then bringing himself back to a sense of wonder, Schuyler grounds the poem in simple images, “I can see the little fists/ and the rocking-horse motion of her breasts” (Schuyler 36-37). Here we are in the quotidian, the plain and simple of the baby clutching at life, and a mother gently rocking the child in peaceful bliss. In this description Schuyler chooses to liken the rocking motion of the mother’s breasts to that of a rocking-horse. On first glance this descriptor seems strange, though in metaphorizing the mother’s motions in this way the reader can sense the steady, even motions of the gentle back and forth cradling movement the mother is enacting. This image becomes tactile and embodied, and serves to

soothe the baby and the reader, giving a tone of maternal love, and moving the reader onward in the poem.

> It's getting grayer and gold and chilly.
> Two dog-size lions face each other
> at the corners of a roof. (38-40)

Now Schuyler provides us with a statement of fact. The night is advancing, the sky is darkening, and the temperature is dropping, yet he includes gold. Here he is indicating that not only is the further setting sun still casting its rays of light upon the view, but also that the further he investigates the world and its beauty, the deeper engulfed in his joy of life he finds himself. And, of course, he passes this joy onto the reader through the imagery and tone. He further displays this joy with a bit of humor. By describing the lion gargoyles as dog-sized, he adds a bit of absurd juxtaposition that shows how humorous, entertaining, and joyful life can be. Though a common architectural feature in New York City, the lion as a gargoyle carries over the majestic similarity with its living counterparts. There is a clear majesty in conjuring the sunset, its gold, and the lion. Schuyler is awe-struck at the majesty of this final day of February.

In ending the poem, Schuyler employs anaphora to close his ode to the day:

> It's the yellow dust inside the tulips.
> It's the shape of a tulip.
> It's the water in the drinking glass the tulips are in.
> It's a day like any other. (41-44)

In a clear and succinct way, Schuyler has brought his poem to an end. The anaphora that begins each end-stopped line helps reiterate Schuyler's tone of assurance. The yellow pollen of the tulip reminds us of the beauty of the sunset, the shape of the tulip reminds us of the love felt by the speaker and the mother rocking her baby, and the water in the glass reminds us of the green of the tulip, the sea, and the UN Building. He ends by reminding us that this day, this day before

March first, is like any other day of the year. Schuler is telling us that this beauty is found on any day of the year, it just needs to be found.

In this poem, James Schuyler has painted the beautiful scene of an early winter sunset. His use of tone has propelled the ideas of the poem. The ambiguity and uncertainty in the unknown date and the vague memory help drive the argument that the beauty of life is not something contained in specific days but in all days. Little moments such as the rocking baby, the tulips and their pink, the glow of the sky, are not particular to this final day of February. The reader can place themselves on any late winter day when the flowers are beginning to bloom and the sun starts to set later. There is love and wonder hidden in all of the world's splendor, and it merely needs a poet's eye to provide.

To conclude, it's clear that, to write truly great and engaging poetry, a poet must have an intense understanding of tone and how to employ tone in both complex and varying manner. James Tate, in his interest in subversion of expectations, absurd turns, surreal ideas, and juxtaposed images, uses these techniques to create tonal leaps and variations that help drive the reader towards the landing of the poem. His work, often concerned more with the emotion the poem is conveying rather than the explicit meaning in the content, has become a staple example of the importance of tone in both the American canon and my own canon. James Schuyler, on the other hand, in his interest of the everyday, the underdog, the regular, and how these things are beautiful in their own right, uses tone in a subtle manner, painting vast and emotionally dense pictures of the day within his work. His eye for the beauty of life has earned him a place among the greats of poetry, and a special place in my own understanding of the craft. Tone, though an "elusive poetic concept" is paramount in generating complex and beautiful works of poetry.

Poems Referenced:

"It's Not the Heat So Much as the Humidity"
James Tate
Originally published in *The Oblivion Ha-ha*, 1970

Only a dish of blueberries could pull me
out of this lingering funk.
I'm tired of taking the kids down
to watch the riot, no longer impressed
with fancy electrical nets, sick
of supersonic nightsticks.

Buy myself a hot dog and a glass of beer–
that helps. It's hard to say
who's winning. Nobody is winning.

Boy, Kansas City! Big zoo! Oriental art!
Starlight Theater: Annie Get Your Gun
going into a seventeenth year.
Once I met Tab Hunter there, four o'clock
in the morning, standing in line

at the Coke machine, so tall and blond,
though not much of a conversationalist.

It's good to be home, trying to soften
the blow for young girls who are inclined
to fall off their porches.

Some of my best friends are…
Curse on those who do or do not take dope.

When Autumn comes, O when Fall arrives,
in her chemise of zillion colors,
I will sigh noisily, as if an old and
disgusting leg had finally dropped off.

No more drinking beer, no more
the perpetual search for an air-
conditioned friend, no more friends.

I'll take piano lessons, French lessons,
speed-reading lessons, and if there is
still time to kill, gawk at a bluejay
tumbling out of the maple tree.

Cars slide by with their windows up,
whispering of a Mexican Restaurant
“with really good Chilli Verde.”

The gutters billow with mauve death;
a mother’s sad voice sends out
a tugboat whistle through the purple mist:
she worries about her children.

And the dangerous fishhook of melancholy
dangles from every dog’s ear.
The dog that saved my life,
that keeps on saving it each long, humid night.
The dead dog. And so:

a shiny baseball hovers over the city.
No one asks why. And so: it passes on.
And so: a telephone starts to ring
in a widow’s cake-filled kitchen…

A rollerskate collides with a lunchpail.

“February”

James Schuyler

Originally Published in *Freely Espousing*, 1979

A chimney, breathing a little smoke.
The sun, I can't see
making a bit of pink
I can't quite see in the blue.
The pink of five tulips
at five p.m. on the day before March first.
The green of the tulip stems and leaves
like something I can't remember,
finding a jack-in-the-pulpit
a long time ago and far away.
Why it was December then
and the sun was on the sea
by the temples we'd gone to see.
One green wave moved in the violet sea
like the UN Building on big evenings,
green and wet
while the sky turns violet.
A few almond trees
had a few flowers, like a few snowflakes
out of the blue looking pink in the light.
A gray hush
in which the boxy trucks roll up Second Avenue
into the sky. They're just
going over the hill.
The green leaves of the tulips on my desk
like grass light on flesh,
and a green-copper steeple
and streaks of cloud beginning to glow.
I can't get over
how it all works in together
like a woman who just came to her window
and stands there filling it
jogging her baby in her arms.
She's so far off. Is it the light
that makes the baby pink?
I can see the little fists
and the rocking-horse motion of her breasts.
It's getting grayer and gold and chilly.
Two dog-size lions face each other
at the corners of a roof.
It's the yellow dust inside the tulips.
It's the shape of a tulip.

It's the water in the drinking glass the tulips are in.
It's a day like any other.

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