Tin House's "Poison:" How Tone and Voice Construct and Subvert Expectations

Literary works in the *Tin House* issue "Poison" feed the readers spoonfuls of enticing stories that gradually work their way through the body and eventually shock the mind. "Poison" gives readers a healthy dose of character connections while subverting ordinary structures through the use of dynamic voices. Evaluating the entirety of *Tin House* magazine, I conclude that it is an idiosyncratic magazine that releases popular, topic-specific issues in addition to nonspecific seasonal issues. For example, I read the Fall 2019 issue "Poison" where the editor-curated works could be connected to literal or metaphorical poison. While I initially found it off-putting that a journal would limit their works according to theme or content, reading the "Poison" issue gave me a clear idea of what literary techniques the editors tended to favor. Based on the "Poison" issue, I would argue that this magazine's aesthetic strongly values tone; however, because tone is such a broad literary device, I additionally argue that the works in "Poison" commonly create tone through a dramatic statement, irony, and rapid plot movement. *Tin House* magazine's "Poison" issue contains works, specifically "Sisters," "Ghost Story," "Poison Stories," "The Commerce Between Us," "They Chopped Down The Tree I Used To Lie Under And Count Stars With," and "Barber Song," that all revolve around establishing a distinct tone, or voice, and creating a concrete narrative that undergoes surreal transformations.

Fiction stories in "Poison" rely on tone and voice to create a plot-dense narration, and this narration uses tonal shifts to create unique transformations. The fiction story "Sisters," written by Jonathan Durbin, conforms to the *Tin House* aesthetic by using character voices and an ironic tone to distort Coney Island into a dystopian hell. Durbin creates a world in which nature has ambiguously caused the human illness that causes the characters to "go somewhere the air is fresh, our mothers

warned us, where nothing natural grows. Eventually we listened. We'd always loved Coney Island" (57). The intrinsically healing ability of the natural world is inverted as characters learn to follow directions, thus alluding to the absurd, yet confident, doctrines enforced by the "thin men" at Coney Island (52). Coney Island elicits a playful and childlike tone, but Durbin places violent and oppressive diction in Coney Island and depicts a physically deteriorating park. In the above quote, past tense and short sentence length give the unnamed narrator a reluctant voice, thus foreshadowing the ominous events and implying that the characters no longer love Coney Island. The tone is both somber and surreal, thus ironically deconstructing reality and depicting a physical setting that forces the characters into the plot.

Ethan Rutherford's fiction story "Ghost Story" also uses tone to subvert the ordinary and ironize reality. In "Ghost Story," a father's bedtime story teeters on the cusp of fact and fiction, and the father's fantastical voice contrasts with his children's (ironically) grounded mindsets. The father's voice and confident, statement-like assertions blend his fictional stories into reality and cause the reader to interpret "Ghost Story" as a reflection of reality grounded in this average man's life. The narrator uses the bedtime stories to "return to those secret corners of his memory … There he could make mischief in the corridors that linked his old classrooms … occasionally he would go into a sort of trance, not unpleasant, but the boys would gently rock him if he went on too long" (178). In a self-aware tone, the father allows his stories to transform reality into something more fantastical. Rutherford ironically grounds both the reader and the father in the children's actions---that periodically interrupt the father's story. This contrast between surreal and concrete diction, such as making real memories into mischievous ghost stories, establishes a complex tone

that transforms a statement-driven narration into a symbolic meditation on memory, thus moving the story into new intellectual territory even if the physical setting never changes.

Similar to the fiction section, "Poison's" nonfiction contains works that rely on distinct voices to drive their literary impact, and they tend to use historical voices to do this. Leela Corman and Lauren Groff's collaboration, "Poison Stories," focuses on famous women poisoning men, and this is accomplished by Groff's transcendent and strong tone and Lauren's magical realist illustrations. These stories shine because women are given powerful voices that demand attention and dictate the plot; moreover, they adhere to *Tin House's* aesthetic of having a narrative-driven by character voice. In the essay "Boudicea," the female narrator embodies a self-aware, and in-control tone, and Corman's illustrations evoke strength and power from distinctive color tones. The first-person narrator confidently states: "I had led my Celts," "come, I say to my daughters," and "the poison / will have drawn great savage grins over my / daughters' pale mouths" (157). Through direct subject-object control, the woman exerts a god-like force upon the poem as she leads an army into battle and determines the fates of her daughters. The daughters, who are brutally raped and then die from the poison given by their mother, elicit an ironic tone through physical distortion and the "savage grins" left on their faces after they die (157). In "Boudicea," the mother's emotionless tone creates tension between the smiling daughters and the dramatic situation, thus transforming the power of oppression, or poison, over the women and giving humanity agency over death. In Corman and Groff's piece "Visha Kanya," the historical stories about the visha kanya, or "poison girl" in Indian culture are explored through an unforgiving, enchanting tone. The narrator claims that she is "no seduc- / tive femme fatale," but the poem's imagery constructs her as having a "poisonous hand" that kills men who "deserved what they got" (165). While this poem could fall

into the trap of simply retelling a female assassin's story, Groff creates a woman who does not feel seductive and instead voices a self-fulfilled voice that has "lived to be an old woman" (165). Corman's image depicts a woman unflinchingly killing a man simply by touching him. The lack of emotion illustrated on the woman's face parallels with the self-assured tone created by Groff that makes the readers sympathize with the woman instead of the dead men. Therefore, Corman and Groff create art that is controlled by the narrator's tone, thus adhering to *Tin House's* stylistic preference for story and voice-over image and music.

While Corman and Groff relied on historical references to strengthen their tone, *Tin House's* poetry section creates movement by shifting tones and using concise yet transformative diction. In Catherine Wing's poem "The Commerce Between Us," the narrator's voice shifts, and a stream-of-consciousness tone follows a string of associative words. Wing moves her poem through strings of diction and describes in a magical voice how "every butterfly floats above / its stinging sea-equivalent" "sea-weed matched weed/ mermaid matches maid" (26). As words build off one another, the poem inhabits believable qualities despite its surreal tone. Similar to how "Ghost Story" blurs the line between fact and fiction using contrast and irony, "The Commerce Between Us" draws in "those that live between / blur in the thick lines / that ring the horizon's margin / neither light nor dream" (26-27). Wing grounds her abstract poem in a distinct and consistent voice, and Diana Marie Delgado also uses consistency and statement in order to create a distinct tone in her poem "They Chopped Down The Tree I Used To Lie Under And Count Stars With." Delgado creates tone through associative thoughts, statements, and images---similar to Wing's technique. In each one-line stanza, Delgado delivers thought-provoking ideas in a mundane and stark voice such as how "the phone rings, it's the devil---I forgot to tie up the dog" (70). She moves the poem from thought

to thought, occupying the reader through a meditative tone and placing the narrator in conversation with numerous settings and mindsets. The surrealism of having the devil answer the phone is made believable by the narrator's curious and consistent tone. Moreover, Delgado's contrasts common-place objects and activities with imaginative statements in order to transform a character-driven, narrative poem into more of a lyrical and abstract poem that moves with the narrator's voice. Joshua Bennett also defamiliarizes the familiar in his poem "Barber Song" where the setting of a barbershop is abstracted through surface-level images and a straightforward tone. Bennett hyperbolizes an ordinary profession, being a barber, and uses a second-person address to create believability and a self-assured tone. He writes: "you are how we first learn / to bend language built / to unmake us," thus alluding to how "Barber Song" will unravel reality by creating far-fetched, yet confident, assertions (168). The narrator starkly and unquestionably voices that "you dream … you liberate" and that you are "guardian / of it all" (168, 171). Bennett conforms to *Tin House's* aesthetic of embodying a clear tone and then stringing along with images and comparative statements in order to convince the reader to delve into his make-believe world.

In the *Tin House* issue "Poison," works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, such as "Sisters," "Ghost Story," "Poison Stories," "The Commerce Between Us," "They Chopped Down The Tree I Used To Lie Under And Count Stars With," and "Barber Song," focus on producing a strong tone that moves or transforms the narrative. Without a distinct voice, the stories would lack urgency; moreover, *Tin House* draws readers in by curating a collection of works that revolve around a fearless tone. The tone's believability often contrasts with the work's surreal details, thus pushing readers to question reality and get lost in the narrator's mindset. *Tin House's* aesthetic seeks to entertain an

audience by subverting their expectations and elevating strong voices that articulate certain themes and concepts while developing unique voices to guide the narratives.

Works Cited

Spillman, Rob, editor. *POISON*. vol. 20, no. 1, TIN House Books, 2018.

"Boudicea" from "Poison Stories" (Corman, 156)

"Visha Kanya" from"Poison Stories" (Groff, 164)