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IDENTITY AND ENERGY IN POETRY TINY HOUSE. TELL ME A SECRET.

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IDENTITY AND ENERGY IN POETRY
TINY HOUSE. TELL ME A SECRET.

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Chance Derek Castro, Jr.

June 2015

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Tiny House. Tell Me a Secret. is a poetry manuscript that deals with establishing identity based on the relationships one is involved in, the loss of someone significant, and then coping with that loss. In the book, the speaker who grows up in the care of women becomes sensitive to their pains and questions the necessity of the overt ideas of machismo in his culture and deliberately cultivates chivalry in his romantic relationship as a result. The speaker loses his wife early in their marriage and must cope with her death while continuing to re-learn/establish the identity that she played such a large part in shaping. The poems attempt to clarify identity and heighten poetic energy in the poetic forms of free verse and prose poetry. I hope my collection embodies multiple representations of manhood as macho, tender, and everything in between. The collection attempts a complex identification with multiple types of identities. For me, the reality of identities is in their fluidity. The speakers of my poems ultimately find themselves at ease in their roles and in their understanding of others' roles and lives beyond their own. My speakers do not yearn to just be one identity, however fully. Instead, each man can easily exist in the world as both an adult and still very much the child of his father; the lover of grand romantic gestures and still the loner of deep self-intimacy. While the collection as a whole destabilizes accepted notions of patriarchy, it also, I hope, provides a stable level at which we can understand the speaker of the entire manuscript.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:
IDENTITY AND ENERGY IN POETRY

"Energy arises from conflict."

- Donald Hall, Goatfoot, Milk tongue, Twinbird

One of my earliest and most cherished childhood memories is an evening when my family was crammed into my grandma's house for dinner. In this memory, I am no older than five years, and have spent the day in the care of my dad's mother while my parents were working. All day, I have played with the hand-me-down toys that she keeps in a huge toy box in her hallway closet - toys that once belonged to my father, uncles, and older brother. Knowing the history of each toy is just as important to me as the toy itself.

My dad's family is a large Mexican American family and my dad is something of a central story-teller in the group. He gets it from his mother, whose hyperbolic nature often blurs my reality as a child and makes me believe in a life that is extreme. In my memory, I am fighting with my cousin over a Stretch Armstrong toy that once belonged to my older brother and the toy's arms have reached their capacity. The adults are gathered in the kitchen laughing hysterically so nobody is around to break us apart. My parents' generation was that of the young parent and thus, they were extremely social and sometimes negligent in terms of paying attention to where their kids were. But that's it. My favorite memory is just twenty people crammed into my

grandma's house and everyone I love all together in one place, because as life has since proven to me, it will never be so easy for everyone I love to be together like that again.

My poetry is often about family and particularly, male influences in my life. This is because as I grew up, I couldn't help but notice the variety of ways in which I saw masculinity performed. Nearly every young man worships his father and this became true for me as well. However, being the future-poet-child that I was, the similarities and differences between my father and his father both intrigued and frightened me. For my father was indeed a product of my grandfather. In terms of similarities, they are both so frighteningly, physically strong, and talented handymen; creative in ways I never had to think about. But my father does not play the isolated head of the household role that my grandpa did. My father is something of a social-butterfly-class-clown mash up who would sleep in his mother's bed every time he was scared until he turned thirteen. His closeness with, and similarity to his mother also manifested to me throughout my childhood. My dad has been a great example to me that masculinity is fluid and something we can shape for ourselves rather than something inherent and static. This fluidity has helped me whenever it has felt like the rest of the world is telling me what it means to be a man. Still after all my efforts, I who try to be sensitive and loving, have always struggled to identify myself as someone I am comfortable with and comfortable allowing the world to see.

However, to live a life that falsely portrays my interests and skills, to live a life that denies who I am, became particularly and increasingly problematic throughout my teenage years and filled me with turmoil and I sought to clarify for myself an identity – one I was not afraid of inhabiting. I wondered if perhaps I might even have more than one identity.

To feel this comfort, I have had to really understand myself and all my possible identities. Thus, an attempt to write these identities was born. With “manhood” impending, I found myself growing into a new identity. I would soon discover my desire to articulate my perceptions in a way that I feel only poetry can. As a poet, I find myself taking the traditions and ideas of writers before me and drawing on them in my own creative experience. What I attempt to create stems from my understanding of their poetics and the ways that I can utilize their ideas to explore my own.

While my manuscript is not strictly autobiographical, it follows a young male character who does take instruction in some places from my real life. The narrative arc of the collection more or less follows him into familial moments as well as in love. He starts a relationship, marries his companion and then tragically loses his wife at a young age, and must learn how to survive the loss. Thus, the manuscript exists in three sections that more or less cover these descriptions: *Untimely*, *Petunia*, and *You Are*. The title of the manuscript, *Tiny House. Tell Me a Secret.*, taken from a line in one of the poems, is almost an epitome for the character's life at all points in the manuscript. As he seeks to learn and listen to life's secrets, he grows up and

eventually moves into his own tiny house. He is himself something of a tiny house, wherein much love grows, dwells, and dies. The character finds himself not just noticing the many similarities and differences he finds between himself and those around him, but also finds himself crazy in love with these similarities and differences both. The strongest way my manuscript battles classic notions of masculinity is in a character who recognizes them, but ultimately lives how he wants, even in ways that sometimes contradict those notions. However, the speaker still maintains a close relationship with his father-figures who he sees as types of generational predecessors and it is only through the close relationships of his family that the speaker is able to cope with the loss of his wife in the end.

Initially, I understood myself to be a student of Charles Olson's ideas about projective verse. This is not to say I was writing projective verse, but rather, that I delighted with the idea that language ought to be a corporeal experience. I saw importance in the poem that studies its connection with the breath. I found that in my line endings, with some unique break in an otherwise straightforward line, I could provoke a momentary confusion within my reader. In that moment, as the body attempts to recover from this confusion, it breathes. It re-establishes control and finds itself again in the work. And in the rediscovery of control, the body becomes excited and, thus, energy is heightened. Olson stated that the poem must "at all points, be a high-energy construct, and, at all points, and energy-discharge" (Olson 1).

Energy was my focus as I created many of my earlier poems for this collection including the very first poem, "Corrosion".

Donald Hall, in his essay, "Goatfoot Milktongue, Twinbird", states that energy is devastatingly important. He also believes that it "arises from conflict" (Hall 141). That energy is transferred to the reader and a great poem does this while losing as little energy as possible in the process. "A poem is human inside talking to human inside" (Hall 142). Donald Hall's essay opened my eyes to the ways in which I was being effected by poetry. I was becoming energized with each new connection that my brain made, each time I read a poem. According to Hall, "the reader undergoes a process – largely without awareness . . . which resembles, like a slightly fainter copy of the original, the process of discovery or recovery that the poet went through in his madness or inspiration" (Hall 142).

For me, the poem is a place that at all times requires high energy. It makes sense to me that it almost wouldn't be worth reading if it didn't thrill the reader during or afterward. When the energy is not high, often I find that it's not worth a poem because I believe the poem to be a means of shared experience. This is why my poems often appear as short bursts of energy that burn fast and leave the reader energized, or at least it is my intention to deliver the least "slightly fainter copy" of my speakers' perception to my readers as possible.

In this essay, Hall quotes W.B. Yeats as saying that "the finished poem made a sound like the click of the lid on a perfectly made box" (Hall 144). Hall

insists that “in the free verse poem, the poet improvises toward that click and achieves his resolution in unpredictable ways” (Hall 144). Referring back to the necessity of conflict for energy, the poem clashes its way through existence like an earthquake fault stores up potential energy. The conflicting faults build up energy in their opposition until they finally slip. This is the resolution the poem achieves and also the powerful release that forms an earthquake. The earthquake is nearly directly delivered into the reader. What Hall calls *Twinbird*, I can more easily understand as earthquake – that is, pleasure in resolution and in release.

I attempt to achieve conflict and gradual resolution within my work both with the surprise in line endings and in the poems that directly complicate language before achieving a resolution. For example, “I Am the Slack” takes a less narrative approach.

I Am the Slack

in a line

of American muscle

the torn upholstery

of a pickup truck

my grandfather rebuilt

the same model that

his daddy drove

away the colored salesman

my father was a salesman

and he was pretty dark skinned
I can't swing a hammer right
my garage door is still
broken I am
not the first man in my family
to go to college to work weekends
but I am the first to hold a door
for my wife
I would sell that pickup
so we could build
a garden of togetherness and squash
the clay into the mold
to reshape everything. (Castro 3)

My goal for enjambment in this poem is the ambiguity in the line breaks, which operate together with the lines above and below them to create tension, complication, conflict, and surprise. For instance, "my garage door is still" is a simple image, but "my garage door is still / broken" becomes a claim: the garage door exists, but in a state of disrepair, one the speaker cannot fix. This is further solidified when the line continues, "broken I am" and "I am / not the first man in my family". Like the broken door, the speaker confronts his fractured self: like his older relatives, he shares the need to work and provide

for his family; unlike those relatives, he deliberately cultivates chivalry. The “broken” or fractured door becomes a way through rather than a blocking wall.

Donald Hall’s concept of Milk tongue, for me resonates with the idea of the body as a conduit for meaning and possibility. Milk tongue in poetry “is the deep and primitive pleasure of vowels in the mouth” (Hall 148). It is where the mental creates the physical. Though, newborns experience milk tongue in sucking at their mother’s breast and in cooing, Hall suggests that milk tongue exists in few places in the modern world: in “swearing... the love of sweet speech . . . smoking, eating . . . drinking; and in oral sexuality” (Hall 149).

I find my poetry aligns with the idea of milk tongue through the pleasure of matching syllables and the joy they create as they pass through the mouth. Sound quality is very important to me in my work both on the page and in performance.

Now particularly, when I consider my own public readings of the poems, I know that I can deliver my work energetically. It is my hope to deliver that energy in written form as well, but I almost prefer to read the poems to having others read them. This feels like an even more direct experience, and thus, less energy escapes from the poems between reader and audience.

While my focus on poetry as it appears on the page, or its form began much earlier than this collection, but I feel that my most complete understanding of form came as I created this collection.

In his essay, “On Open Form”, W.S. Merwin writes that “form has to do directly with time: the time of the poem, the time in which it was written, and

the sense of recurrence in which the unique moment of vision is set” (Merwin 303). This link between form and time particularly struck me as I have worked on this manuscript.

W.S. Merwin notes that form is not to be worshipped, but rather recognized as a means to some end. He claims that it seems to be more important to touch on some unrealized truth, to be pure and naked than to be clever in form. “To recur in its purest forms . . . poetry seems to have to keep reverting to its naked condition, where it touches on all that is unrealized” (Merwin 305). Because of this, most of the manuscript occurs in a more liberating free verse form where I feel the “surprising truth”, or the secrets revealed in my poetry can be best and immediately enveloped by my lines.

However, at times I felt that I could apply Merwin’s ideas to pieces that were written in a prose block form. These pieces were typically centered around my grandmother. For instance, *Aguacate, 1954* begins to grab its reader’s attention with its format on the page. Shaped in prose block form, the poem suggests a quality of a newspaper article, bespeaking a sense of raw truth about to unfold. The simple title stamps a date on the page and thus, sends the reader forward to recount a story told from the perspective of our usual speaker’s grandmother. The prose format lends itself to the timeless quality that the poem seeks to capture as well as drawing the reader’s attention to sound quality, as the usual guide of the poetic line has disappeared. The narrative of the poem unfolds a story about a young girl

who is abused often by her drunk father who claims the child is too light-skinned to be his.

She said:

We followed work to this state when I was nine years old. My father was always in the sun so he wore a straw hat, but it didn't matter. His skin was like those aguacates, especially after years of drinking away the back pain. I remember how he would hold me. And tell me that he didn't love me. *Que yo era una guerita y no podía ser su hija.* He would grip me like the avocado. With unwanted skin and often bruised. *Yo no te quiero*, he would say with each swipe. *No eres mio, y yo no te quiero.* (Castro 5)

In the poem, the avocado is both the symbol for her father's great labor and what provides financial stability for her family as well as an object with whom she shares the likeness of skin. However, this relationship is complex. Her skin is actually light and the avocado's is actually dark. However, her father, a man who handles avocados for a living, takes similar liberties with her young body. The poem attempts to suggest subtle hints of sexual abuse on top of the physical with lines like, "I remember how he would hold me" and "He would grip me like the avocado".

While the poem destabilizes accepted notions of patriarchy, it also, I hope, provides a stable level at which we can understand the speaker of the entire manuscript. A young man who grew up in the care of this woman then becomes sensitive to her pains and begins to question the necessity of the overt ideas of machismo in his culture.

I set out to write a collection that embodies multiple representations of manhood as macho, as tender, and as the full gamut between. The manuscript attempts a complex identification with multiple types of identities because for me, the reality of identities is in their fluidity. Poet Sandra Gilbert in her essay, "My Name is Darkness" elaborates: "The woman poet inevitably postulates that perhaps she has not one but two (or more) selves, making her task of self-identification bewilderingly complex" (Gilbert 125). To me, this idea is linked with the previously mentioned conflict of which Donald Hall speaks. Literally, the poet attempts to achieve resolution (in themselves rather than in a poem) through self-identification in order to access the happiness stimulated by that energy. The speakers of the poems in my collection find themselves at ease in their roles and their understanding that more exists than their ways of being. In the poetry, the speakers never yearn to be any one thing fully. Instead each man can easily exist in the world as both an adult and still very much the child of his father; the lover of grand romantic gesture and still the loner of deep self-intimacy. These are the topics of my poetry. The highs and lows in everyday realities.

Frank O'Hara wrote a tiny essay called "Personism". The title was chosen specifically to satire the various forms of "-isms" that were popping up in the poetry world. Though the piece has its comical moments, the richness of it comes in its promotion of a sense of minimalism. Personism is essentially a style that addresses "itself to one person... thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity" - It is overtly loving but never ruined in doing so (O'Hara 307). In its informality and use of the pronouns "I", "you", and "we", personism is something I have adopted an understanding of as the most real, direct style of poetry because it puts its reader on a direct and close emotional level to the poem as they would be with their lover or in any conversation.

Several of my pieces take on this informal and direct style. One example is "Ocean Beach", where a young speaker directly addresses his lover. The poem attempts to utilize the poetic line as its greatest strength. Located at the manuscript's beginning, it proclaims, "Let's hold hands and scream/ at each other". Often in the poem, the line breaks create a multiplicity of meaning in an attempt to energize. Young lovers playing catch with softball gloves is not only an image of activity but also an image of pain and struggle as they never catch the ball "in the web as the spider does". This becomes an image of sustenance. The spider captures his own food, but the young couple buys their chilaquiles. In this way, the relationship breaks the rules of the natural world. This is a theme that will continue throughout the manuscript as the strength of a real love fights its way through obstacles.

Lines like, "though I tickled you you/ never passed gas in front of me" exist primarily for the mouth-pleasure and humor that they create, but also serve the poem by charging it with energy each time the poem breaks and re-creates a pattern of complete thought.

The manuscript's most fragmented self appears in the middle section, a series poem, "Petunia". In it the speaker begins his loving marriage and it quickly goes awry as his wife is diagnosed with an unspecified illness and dies. The poem came out of an attempt at automatic writing.

The slopes are all aflame.

Everything I think to say is slog.

Study me as I exhibit fruitlessness. We gull again
in love to occupy a space more miniature.

Inland. Press your cheek against the
glass. Escalate the windows of the infinite.

I wake up starving

There's a lot
about marmalade. Like origins and children's
books and climbing into an abstract that's prime.

What friends we are to slip the
ocean to our backs

I'm sorry. Deserve it.

Dead feathers lean left as they fall.

Don't be afraid for your

safety.

Define a private space. (Castro 30)

Essentially, I attempted to take the formula that Gertrude Stein made famous in the 1914 collection, "Tender Buttons", and (though this is a bold statement as Stein is a revered figure) add what I thought was missing. That is, a little more direction, a loose narrative arc. I meditated on the story I wanted to create and then wrote for hours on end each day. The next step in the process (and what I consider to be most important) was that I would break about every hour, read what I had written, and try to find meaning in the fragments. From that, I was able to construct something that came out of my subconscious rather than just leave it as fully automatic writing. In that way, I felt the poetry could still make surprising leaps and do what I needed it to do: tell the story. Of course there are many moments of labored language that did not come out of my automatic writing sessions, but rather, from simultaneously tedious and exciting hours of questioning the poems' strengths and weaknesses and attempting to find how I could balance and maintain the excitement without seeming to be repetitive. However, I feel this step is one that ought to be pretty common regardless of what style one chooses to write in. Additionally, sometimes I just needed to get the story onto paper like in the final piece of the series, I was focused moreso on wrapping up the project than on automatic writing.

I haven't been in this

room since it's been a problem. The windows

are blue and screaming for handcuffs. Bend
like our chainlink. Like our
last good greenling to grow
in the garden.

I've been trying to keep the new carpet
clean, but tell me why the fuck did we buy it.
What will we run on when language
is over and the sun is breathing my promises.

Liquor. Sweet liquor come back to me.

Winter. I fear

the energy is out. (Castro 44)

In the final section of the manuscript, the piece "Every Year" is a poem that attempts to break through the pains of loss that naturally occur when dealing with time. The poem appears in a re-arranged list format, suggesting that each of these numbered couplets is a new section expected to follow the phrase every year. In this way, the poem lends itself to multiple interpretations including the incorporation of a refrain to be read between each couplet, reading things in the order that they appear on the page, and also reading the poem in its numerical order. The opening line as an extension of its title works to send the reader straight into the piece without stopping, therefore, creating energy that is later built on with unique word play, well-placed enjambment, and finally closing on a strong symbolic image to convey the greatest possible level of energy to the reader.

The reader begins with a grand opening, "every year . . . on this day we wonder the streets". The immediate play of the word "wonder" should suggest to its reader that the poem they are reading is one in which the mind will explore the areas where young lovers begin to understand themselves and the roles they wish to fulfill in relation to one another. As the stanza closes with the line, "rediscover you in sunhat.", the poem's combination of image and end stop demand a pause from the reader to digest what they have discovered and attempts to create the same time-shattering technique that a black and white photograph of one's grandparents might have.

The next stanza begins, "eighteen, skin thick" and the following enjambment creates a moment where the reader can understand a love that defies the traditional expectations of beauty by simply accepting this darling newly adult companion as they are, somewhat thick. The line might also suggest the common phrase "thick skin" in that the speaker's female companion is not easily upset by criticisms and that she is in that way prepared for the adventure. The stanza then continues, "eighteen, skin thick/ with sunblock and gusto" to give the reader an opportunity to read it straight through, building speed and energy as they do.

The stanza numbered five leads both the speaker and readers' consciousness to an old man seated alone with his hot dog. This image is intended to contrast with the youth and the togetherness of the speaker's couple so that by the time we reach the poem's end and the stanza numbered "four", the image of a frigate on the water rushing to stand still becomes an

erie image. Every year the speaker and his love interest return here in an attempt to defy time by reliving this day together, but just as the lonely old man now eats alone, he too will eat alone. The speaker cannot defy time just as the frigate cannot defy the ocean's waves and be completely still.

Nobody can defy time. The certainty with which I make that statement is the same certainty that lends itself to the logic that no man was ever greater than a woman. If people were to learn one thing from my manuscript, I would hope that it is to value one another for the time we share is limited. It is only when we value each other that we can begin to build a more peaceful world.

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APPENDIX

TINY HOUSE. TELL ME A SECRET.