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McNair Astra First Draft

**Title:** *Jacket: A Poetry Collection*

### **Abstract**

This fictional persona poetry collection depicts a Latinx veteran's struggle of transitioning into civilian life through mental, physical, and economic difficulties. Based on personal experience and influence from hispanic communities and military veterans located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the narration will provide a realistic take of a man's struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, drug trade, and recovery. By applying studies within marxism, queer theory, feminist theory, and postmodernism, the collection will breakdown the start, middle, and end of an opioid addiction. The text intends on informing not only academic, but public interest in how those who suffer from opioid addiction need s rather than enforced punishment.

### **Writing Process**

Initially, this project was to be formatted in a longform novel to depict a fictional narrative concerning a Latinx veteran returning from active duty in Afghanistan and attempts at transitioning into civilian life in Milwaukee. However, at the advisement of my mentors, I changed the format of the story from prose to a collection of poetry. More specifically, the collection uses persona poetry. Although almost every poem can be argued as a persona poem due to the freedom of expressing a narrative from separated from author as the speaker, the didactic use of a persona poem allows the speaker to take on a fictional identity; they are able to provide a plot further from the speaker through the use of fantasy. By employing this style, I was able to switch characters' identities to give personality to each while centering the story around

the protagonist's struggle. used to switch between perspectives in the narrative from George, the veteran transitioning into civilian life; Melania, a sister working multiple jobs to attend college and move away from her home; John, a mixed half-brother who is a professor at a Madison Technical College; and Veva, a mother attempting to prevent the gentrification of her neighborhood.

### **Literature Review**

I reviewed books that concentrated on drug abuse, particularly in opioid abuse from the romantic era to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From Samuel T. Coleridge's 1797, "Kubla Khan," to William S. Burrough's *Junky*, opioid abuse has been depicted in narratives, often criticized as an unnecessary exploitation of nihilistic desires. However, in recent years such collections have been deconstructed as pleas to raise awareness as symptoms of mental illness brought on by misdiagnoses and mental illness. Most recently, Irvine Welch's *Trainspotting*, recently adapted into a film, broke down the stages of addiction from the 'ups' and 'downs' of attempts to wean one's self from the drug. With these materials, I intended on reviewing the depiction of opioid abuse to understand how the narrative structure adds to the theme while intending on preventing a repeat of the style with my own project. To further emphasize the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, I read and critiqued Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, to apply a decentered narrative that the speaker must attempt to ground themselves in to retain agency in a civilian landscape.

### **Method**

First, I scheduled one on one meetings with veterans and recorded their comments anonymously to prevent any form of damage to their reputation. Second, I visited Walker's Point and Clock

Tower Acres to compare the similar Milwaukee neighborhoods and place an authentic setting for the narrative. Although both neighborhoods hold higher ethnic minority populations, Walker's Point had far more social programs and acceptance of separate cultures, whereas Clock Tower Acres carried less opportunities for individuals to improve their livelihood due to legislative deregulation by local government chapters within Milwaukee.

To provide authentic voices to each speaker, I used theatre movement meditation forms to create an isolationist atmosphere within my setting. In doing so, this created a sense of paranoia and outward anxiety, as well as general skepticism. By wearing my father's military fatigues, I would think over what the veteran would do in everyday life: washing the dishes, going for a walk, and receiving the news. Thus, I was able to get into character personas with first drafts using stream of thought, conversationalist poetry to depict each text as an open conversation. I used this same process when writing as a female speaker by donning dresses with moto-jackets, applying make-up, and a wig. However, I wanted to follow traits with female empowerment by listening to post-punk bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Pretenders, and Patti Smith. After each first draft, I would move onto the next poem, later returning to the prior piece for continuous editing.

### **Application of Theories**

Postmodernism – Although a dated term, this era of writing depicts subject matter in a non-linear narrative to break away from an overarching theme of altruistic beliefs. Rather than follow a “singular truth,” or single ideology to complete and accomplish tasks, this style defects from a simplified narrative to bring forth layers of causes which lead to effects. In this case, the protagonist, George, succumbs to an opioid addiction due to a reliance on prescription drugs to relieve the physical and psychological restraints from a tour of duty. The narrator does not

simply use drugs but relies on them due to inadequate transitions into civilian life. Continuing the non-linear narrative, the speaker of each poem provides little to no information as to how they entered the setting, thus depicting the psychoactive side-effects of drug use as well as assimilation into a homeland that has since become unfamiliar.

Marxism – The study of commodities applied to individuals' bodies based on their working value shows through the speaker, Melania or Mel, as an employee attempting to save up enough of a minimum wage income to attend college. However, the speaker slowly learns that they cannot afford to accomplish this as they cannot purchase items from their workplaces. The theory is also used within the setting as the neighborhood in Milwaukee faces gentrifying construction to create an interstate freeway. Since the neighboring citizens cannot argue with the city council members, they are prevented from protecting a basic income as commuters no longer have access to the storefronts.

Race Theory – Each of the characters are of Latinx heritage, however multiple speakers separate themselves from the narrative. The speaker, Veva, holds onto these traits by using terms and phrases in Spanish in the hopes of informing the readers of cross-cultural communication. However, separate speakers such as John attempt to live life as a “white-passing” individual with privilege, thus commits erasure to their identity. This separation causes a rift between the familial dynamics. The speaker, George, becomes stuck in a liminal space of wishing to embrace their identity, yet are held back due to the patriotic honor they hold to the United States as they served for their country's military service.

Feminist Theory – Although Veva holds the status as the matriarch of the family, they symbolize the passing of older waves of feminism. She wishes to remain a “homebody,” however through non-linear flashbacks her history of abuse by her husband gives examples concerning how she

ended up remaining within the neighborhood subject to gentrification. Melania provides a contemporary outlook on feminist movements within the 21<sup>st</sup> century; of a woman wishing to be expected of greater things than the male siblings raised socially separated by her mother, Veva. Although her voice is often repressed due to sexism within the workplace, she finds ways of creating power by blurring the lines and finding grey areas in what is considered right and wrong.

Queer Theory – This theory was applied to further exude the grey areas of gender norms, more specifically, regarding George’s masculinity as a wounded soldier returning home. Trapped in a liminal space, George must ground himself by referring back to the familial bonds he built in his neighborhood before leaving for armed services with men. By blending these two environments together, George learns that his camaraderie for fellow soldiers was deeper than a familial love, but a romantic one. However, George continues to reject these ideas until once of his friends dies due to an overdose.

### **Examples**

By concentrating on these two pieces in the collection, I wished to show the “otherness” of problems such as familial strife, ethnic identity erasure, and chronic opioid dependence. As shown in “She Follows in Hot Pursuit,” the speaker, George, suffers from the loss of a lover due to their own overdose. Although he continues attempting to run from the moment of a loved one’s loss, he cannot escape as he stops in a city development, similar to his, and hunted down by the guilt of accidentally killing his partner.

“Thanks-for-Givin’ Arsenic” exemplifies each of the primary speakers in a single setting. Each speaker wishes to enjoy a Thanksgiving family celebration, however, also are aware of the

impending argument that will arise. Instead of using the climax – depicted in a third-person narrative – I concentrated on the rising action as each speaker separates themselves from one another, thus providing a departure from the nostalgic bonds they once carried.

### She Follows in Hot Pursuit

Eyes wide, bloodshot search for an eclipsed horizon

line reflected by the night sky to direct these shaking  
gripped hands across the worn leather power steering

rattling the hot tin roofed 98' Geo Tracker like a half—

past alarm clock that refused to be hammered down  
by a heavy handed “Not now.” *Flipump flipump*

*flipump* treads below along the rolling roaming hills

this highway was paved across, which — by law —  
must be sped at least 15 miles over to reach the next

mile mark. Between the beaten tread paths, the radio

fritz screeches its best banshee impression, piercing my  
ears to meet what the brainwaves review: rosy cheeked

curves turned pale boned, riddled with needles, the punch—

in time sheet at the Exit 13 Mobil station awaiting its turn  
for rolling pins and bulldozers, and the last chunky bean

n' cheese burrito traded for the half gram snow sack keeping

warm between both of my own that remain at the top of that list.

Aligned alongside the broken down, cracked skin county road,

sit farmland fences competing for duplicate commercial contracts  
to shelve the thickest 12oz. beef which once fertilized the rest  
of the produce down beyond the frozen food aisle marked “Fresh  
Organic Produce,” later recalled for exposure to E. Coli.

I can’t smell the shit, nor taste shit—just make a rush for white  
lights peeking over the last hill. Yellow and red lights advertise  
a slab of grease between 2 buns and veggie alternatives embroiled  
on the same stained, grill timers. Adjunct stand towering window  
patterned, tattered buildings competing for the lowest rate stay.

Concrete roads held by crumbling support beams web above to mark  
which way is right. With another lick of the snowsack, I hit the gas  
for the exit onto the interstate, yet no sign peaks in sight. Only a large  
green hand of grass blocks my path at 60 miles an hour. The Geo  
nearly topples into the embankment of weeds, gravel flies, and I come  
to terms that my death certificate will be marked “Death by Failure,”

before my arms swing the wheel to a hard left onto the interstate exit.

A Jewish man sings of his friend named Jesus as my eyes lock with a crying  
silhouette ripping away tufts of grass from an arrow sign pointing left only.

Thanks-for-Givin’ Arsenic

*Georgie’s Last Methadone*

“Smoke ‘em if ya’ got ‘em”  
drill sgt’s words still ring  
from then I didn’t smoke

not then savages draped  
in RPG's we supplied  
to see the red in white 'n blue

now the smouldering ashes  
burn between fingers where  
The spoon suppose'

to sit where the IKEA fork  
Will be smokes'll  
be the only menu's entree

for tonight's dinner  
for tomorrow  
that next clinical hit

*Melanie's 5 More Minutes*

"Where ya' goin' shorty"  
called from aisle  
3 littered with 'em boys

those kiddies I sweep  
with a smile,  
that wink they know

not to bite at, because  
mine licks lips  
just to shatter teeth set

on the pavement I  
just finished  
sweeping and lord

knows Boss'man  
can't lose  
another gas clerk

just before dinner  
'fore John,  
Georgie, and mom

*John's I-90 Exit from St. Paul*

Already my knuckles  
crack, bleed  
Milwaukee's suppose'

to be warmer than St.  
Paul. I'll kill  
channel 5's weather

man and Georgie's  
gotta' hold  
the last word as he

but this is not high  
school time  
and I'm not shoved

in that ivory tower  
locker Mel  
joked about last year

*Homemade Stuffing*

I know this will  
go well like it has every  
last time before

John was only  
joking that lil' cynic  
he's spending

too much time  
up there anyways. He  
lost his touch

Mel's gotta'  
settle down, at least  
soon. try not

to bring that up  
*Veva* and my Georgie.  
he hasn't been

Home not since  
making his landing here  
some place safe

**Dissemination**

By the spring, there will be a total of 30 to 40 poems that will switch from separate perspectives to depict the beginning, middle, and end of the addiction. Before submitting this collection to publishing agencies, I intend on sending individual pieces from the collection to Barstow and Grand, Volume One, and the Chippewa Valley Writers' Guild for additional recommendations. As a full collection, I plan to submit them to Dorrance Publishing, Balboa Press, Fulton Books, and fifteen other publishing agencies outside of the Midwest of the United States.

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