Shriveled Veins of My Stories

A Senior Project

presented to

the Faculty of the English Department

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

by

Jacob W. Franks

June, 2010

© 2010 Jacob W. Franks
Table of Contents

1  Grandpa Was a Good Shot
4  An Oiled Gun and California Rolls
6  Junkie Goddess
7  Submerged in Morro Bay
9  Proletarius
10 Mourning Sun
13 Peach Fuzzed Memories
16 First Drink
18 Property Value
21 Soldier’s Star-Crossed Dream
23 Sunday Spaghetti
25 Empty Stapler
27 Anonymous Note Pertaining to the Murder of a Guttered Out Slag
28 That Night I Slept in My Boat
29 The Death of Adam Brown
31 To Kyle,
33 Dried Poppy Seeds
35 Garnished Friends
38 Summer Pond
41 Porch Talk
Grandpa Was a Good Shot

I looked down the metallic
Posts and lined up a small
Plant twenty-five yards
Down the line. Elbow rested
On the glass patio table,
Next to the busted up double-
Wide. The pulse in my hand
Beating against the trigger
As he sat beside me. His white
Beard rustled, he quietly said,

*Take a deep breathe. Good,*

*Now exhale…. I let out a sigh*
And squeezed the trigger as instructed.
The air hissed out of the Crossman
BB gun and snagged a leaf. A tiny
Hole disrupted the network
Of pale veins. *Good job, son.* I
Shouldered the rifle and sauntered
Back toward the swing bench on
The front deck. The old man plopped
Down in his La-Z-Boy and yelled, *Jane,*
Get me a drink! I stayed outside
And looked up at the dark blue clouds,
Slowly marching.

‡

From under my bed,
I push the forgotten BB gun
Into my hand. I want to know
If the rusty toy will still pump
Pellets through empty soda cans.
Walking out back, the metal
Grows heavy as the pillowed
Soldiers patrol. The old man was
Lying in a retirement home the last
Time I saw him, barking out cold
Orders. His spotted brow would
Furrow as I walked into his room.
Blue eyes glanced at me, then wandered
To the window at his left. No words
Called me back when I turned to step
Out of the door and down the hall.
I load the gun and aim at the target.
Breathe in… release. The Coke can

Stands tranquilly, unscathed.

A tiny hole through pale veins.
An Oiled Gun and California Rolls

Her eyes shine behind patched

Foliage. Standing on a leaning

Path leading to the hillside of

Twining Brodiaea. Iridescent

Lines shrink under the sudden

Blow to her side,

She jolts and tries to dart

For the sanctuary of cover, stumbling

Into her shaded origin. A man coated

In shuddering leaves, lifts his eyes

From the sights of a baking barrel.

Breaking from his perch, unsheathing

The slender skinning knife, he uncovers

A way to fashion her in a manner

Suitable for the wall of his den.

Purging that sordid blade, which

Carpeted the moss velvet, he wades

Through pools blinking

In western light. Viscera, coiled

And tangled, guides to dripping
Bodies. Limp
Flesh, putrefied by curled lips,
Which smack as they finish
A course of cooled California rolls.
Lifting the hornless head over his shoulder,
Her chin bounces once before hollowed
Eyes rest, cast back
At the failure of her final charge.
Junkie Goddess

Weighted die roll in the unlit alley-
way of the skull-crowned king. Tall, dark castles
of duck taped cardboard stand erect behind
star-lit knights. Noble green, pushed to pockets
of hoary jeans, blue as that young maiden’s
eyes. He saunters up to her, and places
a boiled hand around her narrow jaw,
then lifts her chin, lucent moon exposing
silver scowl: a spotted and rough face; gate
of frail, failed ivory; golden banner
of thin, frayed hair. My Queen, oh Queen! Willing
mother of jackals, crouched in the grimy
palace of knaves, shoving their drawn faces
into maggoty meat. There at his feet,
spellbound, she holds a nectar filled syringe,
elixir of ruby red chivalry.
Submerged in Morro Bay

Mike turns to see her yelling
but the morning wind grabs her
words and scatters them down
the beach’s pale neck, wrapped
tightly with the silver scarf
in which they stand. The water eats
at the sand beneath his feet, and he
feels he’s slipping out to sea,
as if Poseidon’s own coralloid
hand slew inside him and beckoned
him forward. Stepping into the gray
water, small waves slap against
thighs. Paddling hard, the cold
seeps in his suit and up his arms.
His mind lunges back to the camera
slung on her shoulder as walls of salt
bend up and loom in front of him,
holding there, staring down their noses
like guards with whetted teeth.
He goes to duck dive but his hand

slips on the rail, head clips the board
and he whorls down into the sable
water. Spin cycle, tug of leash, small
air bubbles tickle his face, hand clips
a small bit of buried sand… maybe,
but it’s too dark to sense under the cadence
of those pounding drones. His lets the rip
of the wave spin him freely as a child

in its arms. The sun sifts through marbled
clouds and a green surface glows like
a stolen emerald on the finger
of a fish-pruned pirate. Mike kicks

the ground toward icy surface air.
Pulling himself on his board, he shakes
the clinging water from his face then glances
back to the beach, but the current has pushed him south,
and she wandered off, looking for washed up seal corpses.
Proletarius

This is my praising poem on white suburbia that never smelt so good with your weekend barbecues of roast chicken filling the air like teenage girl’s pink skirts rolled at the top to show just enough ass to get those peroxide blond boys turned on in the summer swimming pool of your beach house taken back by the bank ‘cause daddy got laid off at the plant and now just smokes weed in the garage watching M*A*S*H reruns and mom twists the blue tie of the post man around her fingers missing the ring that was pawned off to pay for cable while you sit doodling in a college classroom.
Mourning Sun

I
Gold strands weaved,
thick as nectar,
into the man’s ’57 Chevy.
As the cab filled up, his
eyes ran along the road,
and spotted hands absently
flicked on the radio.

II
Alone in his room, he
stared at a twitching screen.
Shades tightly shut,
she beat at them
like an invading horde,
torches lit. She
whispered, “Look at me.”
The cloth was ripped down,
the room engulfed.
He watched everything
wash clean in glaring light.
III
He walked out and felt
her pour over him, through
his clothes, through his skin,
then stepped onto the path
that slid behind the weather
beaten house, a speck
in the barren countryside.
Trekked hard trodden routes,
crossed many times before,
his thoughts contorted
and tied him in a straight
jacket. She leaned against him
and cut a shadow –
ten feet tall and crooked
as his walking stick.

IV
She cloaked the sky
and it fluxed between
a yellow, to red
then faded a tenuous purple.
He had followed the path
to the cliffs near his house.

Staring down, he saw her

kiss the ring on a ragged finger,

then slipped the cane over the edge

into the chomping waves

as she fell from view.
Peach Fuzzed Memories

I saw heat waves snaking off the road,
charmed under the California Sun,
on the drive home in the gray Astro van
with the busted A/C. The funeral
was very long and very Catholic.
I had glanced around to look at everyone
else’s mouths muttering,
and tilting my head
down, pretended to pray,
“Thank you, God, for the chili cheese
burger I had for lunch, it was delicious.”
Aunt Margaret was already a fading memory,
although I could still remember how
she hugged me close, pressing me
like a lifejacket into a Wal-Mart blouse,
while I drowned in the smell
of stale Marlboro Reds.
We pulled into another rest stop on the 99,
Mom told me to take Matt to the bathroom.
She and I both knew,
There was always that one stranger
who tried to strike up a conversation
while you were taking a leak, so I didn’t
blame her, but I bitched about it anyway.

We got back to the cars and saw
Grandma Joanne in pain. Her eyes
gave her silence away – weak,
ready to shatter, pieces of china
near careless children. She was stuffed
into the back of Grandpa’s old Caddie, propped
up against rust colored pillows.

My mind ran between the girl in my
math class with the long socks that went
all the way up to her uncrossed knees,
to how long it would take the peach fuzz
on my chin to fill out, sure to show
everyone just how tough I was…
the list stretched longer than those endless
clusters of white and pink Oleander bushes.
We pulled out of that dump and I was back
to staring out the window, occasionally
glancing at my own reflection rolling
on top of overcast clouds,

wondering if I could avoid drowning
in the water polo game next week.

“And now?” I can hear you ask.

I can’t remember your car pulling off at your exit,
I can’t remember waving good-bye,
I can’t remember promising I’d visit soon.

…I can remember saying, “I love you,”
but here’s the catch,
I can’t remember what I was thinking of
when I said it.
Cards snap against the table
as Joe Whetstone lets boxes
of 30s pile up outside his
window, growing as sodden
as the last two years
of high school. Painted
nails sprawl out
under glass bowls, burning
on second-hand couches.
The half-closed lids of a done up
teeny bopper prepare scaffolds
that quiver under a mumbled,
Do you think I’m pretty?
A kid wearing the uniform
of a losing JV soccer team, wanders
into the hazy and tipsy room.
Jessie sits in a recliner
next to where he stands,
slips her fingers
in the exposed string of his
shorts, pulls it tightly around
his narrow waist, watching him
squirm under the light pressure.

*How’d cha make out?*

He answers while scanning
the pulsing room, *Won*.

He gives up, climbs the stairs
out of the basement. Hears
her breathing scrimmage his own:
down a photo frame covered hall,
across a room with scattered
homework and dirty clothes,
on the floor.
My father looks down
at his only child, telling
him of the way Aunt
Margaret would squeeze
his cheeks while speaking
the Latin-laced words of Italian,
which he was never taught.

How Uncle Louie would
would have dark-red wine
poured and ready for them
before their asses hit the chairs.

The garlic and parsley of Aunt
Rosie’s cooking, filling the small
house in San Francisco.

He told stories, of their stories:
of how times were back
before all their neighbors
moved away, or died off –
replaced by yuppie doctors,
gutting rooms, surgically
ripping out so many embedded
memories and tossing them into
the street for Tuesday cleaning.
He made it sound like an organ
transplant, without anesthetics.

Then he finally got around to tales
of grandpa, of Black Jack and Roulette,
and how some men will bet anything,

*They’d bet their souls if they could.*

***

We stand in a grassless yard
of a beaten-down trailer park.
I twirl a screwdriver like
a baton into the air, it stabs
an empty sandbox a few yards
off. Slapping my hands together,
I turn to the young man beside me,
It ain’t that we’re always
in shit spots, just no’un wants
‘em while we’re in ‘em.

If you wanna keep anythin’
in life, you’d better have
the money to buy it back.

I laugh at the thought of some college
man, coming to this town-by-the-river,
after all the double-wides are sluggishly towed
away. Laughed at him and his Botox lips,
grinning at the land I spent years
sweating into.

Laughed at the thought of my
boy’s pickup driving
to a beaten shack, calling it home
for a few years.

Looking out iced windows
with a scowl hacked into his face.

Wrapped in some portable
freezer, instead of taking
the 500 bucks in his mattress
and driving as far south as he can.
Soldier’s Star-Crossed Dream

All warriors twitch next to the gently sloping sleep,
alone with metal valor dangling like bats from their chests.
Eventually, the Winged Men, drifting blocs exposed
in sunlight, will wane to a pile of smoking deadwood,
but not yet –

for the pillars that bear Capitol Hill
shiver in an endless tide of taut
puppet strings haled in the hands of liver-spotted
men shakily propped up by a gilded canes.

A scorched grunt’s sunstroke-nonsense, released here
and there, screams of Mother Fuckers!

This nausea-procured inheritor, watching Humvees
wade through the sweat and rattle down roads of bone,
damns all those chortling rats swimming in their loot
as they meander in unfurled men-o’-war.

The Winged Men point and stout warships break
through combers, as tinged eyes bend over treasure
chests and fondle trinkets like feral babes prodding
a platoon of restless camel-chauffeurs, with brains
as strained as a drunken giant’s footsteps.

Is this is enough to tease our knotted noose
out of those shriveled hands and simply speak ill of them,

they who grant land to those cross-faded
infants, swinging from the Chrysler’s eagles,

they who send every dead soul weaving together acrid
potions that turn the youth’s gleaning eyes to the stars,

those Winged Men, sucking through twisty straws
and fattening on blood-red Pinot Noir?

Pvt. Paxton,

shaken to wake, blinks away the down of sleep,
stares at sulking shadows under the moon of Durrani\textsuperscript{1} Emperors.

\textsuperscript{1} The Durrani Empire was centered in what is present-day Afghanistan (1747-1826).
Sunday Spaghetti

Blue, checkered drapes lean
Away from the window
Overlooking the garden
Of overripe tomatoes,
Sweat inducing parsley,
Charming Rosemary,
Whose toes sink
Deep in the wet ground.
Spaghetti steam curls
Around her olive hands
While roasted garlic
Bubbles in a pan
Of Mamma’s sauce.
James finishes
The Bruschetta,
Shuffles through
The teal tiled kitchen.
He can feel
Himself drowning, his
Wife turns out the door
With his daughter in her arms.
A current bellows out
Of her mouth and tugs
James, as a trout on a line,
Held by a weary
Fisherman. Eddying up
And out the open window,
The hook pulls him
By his gashed lip
Up to the deck,
Where he lies flopping.
He goes to the shed,
Selects a good rope.
Heel kicks the chair
Down – shaking hands
Grab for the swinging bulb,
As a child crying
Back a lost balloon.
Final twitch to the popping
Lamp. Usurping
Moonlight lays her
Silver body along
His kitchen floor
And the rotting plants outside.
Empty Stapler

With legs unfolding
like paperclips
she lays on the futon
in the two room
apartment with a copy
of Men’s Health
dangling between fingers.

Her silver eyes
bounce like pink
erasers hitting
the floor, which is
littered with crumpled
poems thrown from across the room.

I fiddle a daydream,
pilfered by my dull pencil,
contorting its erect
body into rubber.
I believe
the poem finished, pull the stapler,
slam my hand
against the head, but the only thing
left behind is a small indentation.

I turn to her
and ask if we any more,
but her gaze is anchored
while her hands slowly
massage an oily stud, as if she
could feel his pulse through the pages.
Anonymous Note Pertaining to the Murder of a Guttered Out Slag

Could you scream at it this way?

I. While the treasured pence of this vagrant are snapped, suspicions of the harp, tucked away in the corner, emerge from under your cap;

II. While scattering like a bug, her soul overturns after death and converts to an unkempt bank of deception;

III. While she grants leave after the bird of red plumage bursts, along with shortfalls of wine; both of which are gulped by refined-golden fools.

Oh, sweat inducing sweet!

Licked to stick on the underside of a poker table.

Heart pounds to the hoof beats of these horned beasts, in the forest of the spearman, leading to the melody of that wind-warbled harmonica,

And you’ll hear it sing the answer, No! Too early! As if cried by barbed bobcats, caught slipping dripping paws around the canary’s neck.

Swabbed spit off the deserted piece will tell of a thousand lies: all of which are true.
That Night I Slept in My Boat

Once in Shaver, the father of
the lake spat out fish whose fragile
bones cracked and split on my blue teeth.

I glanced at two native boys
on a raft; the water gossiped to me as they
laughed their way through her. A purple sunset
dove behind fired timbers
and turned the horizon to jagged razors.
The lake went murky and quiet, I held
my breath for fear of disturbing
her. Three love stars caught my eye and
hypnotized me: lost boy drifting on the
mountain. Will I find my way
back to that pebbled beach to cast my anchor,
or dwell forever on this lake of slow-burning fire?
The Death of Adam Brown

Under the outstretched arms
of his keeper, young Adam
Brown escapes the flickering
beams, then carouses the day;
eventually, the sun slips and
falls. Soon his shade bends
and stretches far, cutting deep
lines in his gullible face.
He bathes with the rays, but
the sun blisters his skin pink.
The burn aches and squeezes
all liquid from his calloused frame.

Adam stands in the night,
surrounded by that which
he has never gazed upon.
A step-child to the moon,
he peers up to that silver
eye, like a babe to its
nurse. Groping in the dark
he searches for the bonfire
of his dead father. Wandering
in dancing shadows, he stumbles
to the edge of a precipice, the yawning
mouth of the beast. The fall is longer
than ten lifetimes, and when he stops,
he is clinging to the limb of a wind-blown
tree. Willing to spend an eternity there,
than continue the drop.
To Kyle,

Your voice cracks on
my ears like splitting rock,
jesting and smirking behind
splintering yellow teeth.

The soiled mop-top hair,
blankets whitewashed eyes,
in a failed attempt to disguise
that void within your skull.

I hate your breath, which
scurries up out of your throat,
to curled lips, wide
and gaping as a toad’s.

My gut tears at itself like
a mad dog sawing at its
leg in a trap, when I spot
you stalking toward me.

An insult gushes up,
wheezes out of blackened lungs, sends me spiraling like a stone through glass.

My mind fills with mire.
I dive, swimming behind a split damn, aching to spill forth to the valley below.

You become a lone figure,
walking through a ruined building, smoldering ashes sifted in hair, down plastered skin.

You turn, white vines intertwine on an unburned wall. Feel the piercing, like acid in your chest, a reminder of a soul cut away like a tumor.

But,
I can see there is no escaping you... you, whose voice poisons my ears every time my dry lips crack.
Dried Poppy Seeds

There sat a girl with dry, splitting hands,
Trying to blink out the low-glowing neon lights.

Her eyes were tightly shut under the high
Noon, only sleeping in the iris-shrinking glow.

Throat had cried for water, but the scotch
Was half-off and money was never cheap.

We leaned close and whispered to May
A question, but the storm didn’t lead to rain.

Only his trailer park grumbles retained their taste –
Crammed the tongue that ran down her face.

She led us to a desert meadow
And pulled poppies out of the dry earth.

Green eyes reflected a maze that couldn’t
Be traversed without pruning shears.
We searched long for the copper
Key to open that chest

With the sawed-off latch,
But found only decanters

Burning amber, while dawn
Sired long shadows across the bar.
Garnished Friends

POW/MIA

The bottle groans,
In a tone that mocks
The garble of old men
Recounting days
Of gullied pride, while
Grubby whiskers snuff
Along the bar in a grabble
For whiskey glasses.

The trilling clock
Makes its rounds
In the Lame Duck Bar,
While Nirvana rattles
The radio perched
Above photos of men
In uniforms
With automatic weapons
Strung over
Scratched-out dog tags.
Wild Turkey kicks Bill
Powers’ throat. As it *clucks*
Down he turns along the bar
To a man missing a left eye.
The hallowed survivor,
A deluded gray,
Whispers to himself,
Three inverted checks
Paraded on a worn, green shirt.

His POW/MIA
Cap with a heavy silhouette
Mimics his own low lying
Brow, slouched haplessly
Forward. A small signed paper
Beats against Bill’s
Breast pocket as he
Drifts outside,
A rudderless derelict.

The tired ’94 Ford sputters,
Taillights tilt south.
The blotched letter peeks
Out of its nest,
Watching the 99 running past.
Bill pulls it out and hands it
To the old man, calls him Dad.
Unrolled like an indictment,
He grunts, Camp Pendleton, is it?
I'm guessin' yur mum knows.

His oily hand reaches
Up to push the hat back.
Rolling the dial, the chorus
Leaks through the cab –
You're face to face, with the man…
Bill swerves into the town
Cemetery. Kneeling
Above an empty grave, he runs
A hand over his engraved surname.
Summer Pond

Blond hair whipped up and over me, windmilling past the trickling light that filtered through red drapes and incense smoke. Winking stars sparked from her skin, which ground into my own, like dry flint. My hands sculpted an hourglass past her hips and up her body. Like an origami instructress, she shifted a shoulder, folded legs. Turning down, her teeth sank deeply into my chest, leaving small, cerise ovals.

I can remember the first time we dove into her bed. Memories wrenched up, like a boot I fished out of a murky pond as a boy. I pulled hard on the pole, leaned back and fell right out of that boat. But I didn’t care, I swam and she
grew more and more familiar, I varied
and sank with her, no longer scrambling
for another condom in the dark.

Her tattoos,
her freckles, the smell of her hair
and how it wheedled the breath
out of my lungs, the galvanizing taste
of her tongue – striking like a firebrand.

«»

You prop up and look at my face,
hair blanketing one sage-like eye.

*What are you expecting from this?*

The effervescent voice leaks
into my head, while the man
there runs frantically, trying
to find those documents I’ve filed
so well. My eyes flee your own
within lamming lids, a leashed
tongue grovels back
behind chain-linked teeth.

*What?*

Grunted response that bores

past grappling lips. I strike

a cleaving smirk, snatch

a smoking cigarette, dust it

into a black tray, then take a long

drag before snuffing it with your name.
Porch Talk

By the time I knew Mary she was sitting
On the back porch with a yellow mutt curled
Around her Velcro shoes. The smoke of some cheap
Cigarette slipping around her thin, soft hands.

The first time I saw her? Bingo. She sat with
This look, like a lighthouse on the edge of crumbling
Cliffs, leaning over choppy waves. Each pounded
At her base and left with a small chunk in its belly.

She would ramble on about random events. Thinking
She could use me like formaldehyde to pickle them in.
I was a willing victim, she had pretty good weed…
You know, for her glaucoma.

I can remember one story about the time she won
Five hundred bucks in Vegas only to have her car break
Down on the trip back. Funny thing, having the money
But no mechanic for 50 miles. I heard it all, man. Every smoky
Breath of that shit. I rolled a Zig-Zag
Between my fingers and asked her if she wanted
A hit. As she talked, our smoke tangled and covered
The sun. All I could think about was grabbing

It in my hands and splitting it open like
A rotten apple. Gold spilling out and running
In veins down my burnt arms, evaporating
As I tried to grab it. I turned to her right as she

Blew out a long drag. Then the old
Bag said it, just above a whisper,

*I dreamt about that night stranded in Nevada.*
*I could see the lights of a town far off.*

*When I got close enough to smell the BBQ*
*Of some neighborhood grill, the whole thing would*
*Bounce back and retreat into the hills. When I finally*
*Was able to catch it, no one was there.*

I woke up sweating in the early summer morning. Glanced
To see my fan sitting idly in the window. Power must’ve gone
Out in the night, but the heat was an excuse to get me out of that dream.
Guess the pot wasn’t the only thing embalmed, I suppose you’d titter.

I Walked to the porch, lit a 27 blend and gazed at a backlit cloud,

Nevada BBQ gnawing like a trapped chipmunk in my brain.