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 alleyway 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

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.

Π

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.

Ш

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.

First Drink

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.

Property Value

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 Durrani¹ Emperors.

¹ The Durrani Empire was centered in what is present-day Afghanistan (1747-1826).

Sunday Spaghetti

Blue, checkered drapes lean He can feel

Away from the window Himself drowning, his

Overlooking the garden Wife turns out the door

Of overripe tomatoes, With his daughter in her arms.

Sweat inducing parsley, A current bellows out

Charming Rosemary, Of her mouth and tugs

Whose toes sink James, as a trout on a line,

Deep in the wet ground. Held by a weary

Spaghetti steam curls Fisherman. Eddying up

Around her olive hands And out the open window,

While roasted garlic The hook pulls him

Bubbles in a pan

By his gashed lip

Of Mamma's sauce. Up to the deck,

James finishes Where he lies flopping.

The Bruschetta, He goes to the shed,

Shuffles through Selects a good rope.

The teal tiled kitchen. 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?

- 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 stubbles
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 –

Cramped 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.