

# PROJECT PAPERS

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## FIGUREHEAD

First we would go to the hedged-in  
front corner always dark under the pines  
to skate on the slippery needles.  
Then up and down the alleys between  
my grandmother's busy trellises  
twined with roses, morning glories and  
the plant with eerie pink wax flowers  
she smuggled back from Finland  
in her umbrella.

We studied the progress of the  
hard little fruits we dared not touch  
of the pear tree my grandmother  
kept her eye on out the back window.  
They were alike, gnarled, silvery  
and old-fashioned.

Then over to the exhausted cherry tree  
to lay our cheeks  
against the black bark,  
and a long ride on the great weathered  
platform swing with a wide bench  
on each side, hard for us to start,  
but once moving I would stand  
braced between two beams  
feeling the weight of its motion  
and the thud through my palms  
when we hit the tree behind,  
the way my grandfather built it  
so it couldn't rock too high.

A visit to the willow tree  
they planted when I was born,  
and a walk along the grape fence,  
careful of underground bees' nests.  
Up the hill past the regular garden,

squash, pumpkins, potatoes,  
to the big garage, no cars inside,  
but old rowboats, hoses, engines and rakes.  
The eaves were stocked with  
two kinds of wasps' nests, paper and mud.  
There was a locked door we  
weren't supposed to go near,  
but hidden by the apple tree whose  
branches dragged on the ground,  
my sisters and I would stare through  
the dusty window panes at the giant naked woman  
clamped to the end of my grandfather's  
work bench, no legs or arms,  
her back arched, the hacked wood around  
her head and shoulders like messy hair,  
covered all over with shallow, broad chisel marks  
like scales, her square chin and  
large round breasts jutting out.

### DOUBLE-PLAY

3.

I'm sitting on the railing of the dugout, studying the guys who are slumped on the bench, everyone trying to seem cool and bored instead of disgusted by the overcast sky, half-empty stadium, and the fact that we're only playing against the cast of *Macbeth*. There's a small fuss as Lady Macbeth tosses out the ball, a pathetic overhand throw that just clears the fence. Macbeth and his men have split into three groups, each crowding around a base. I pick out Macbeth right away, on second, backed by three of his other players; he's a burly guy, wearing a short fur kilt and knee-high boots, his long beard half-covering his bare chest. I guess that the man valiently guarding third alone is Banquo. Lenny Dykstra is our lead-off man. When he takes his position, Macbeth mirrors his move by raising a heavy sword over one shoulder, and his men follow suit, each raising a sword or club. Lenny steps out, impatient with Macbeth's doltish pitcher. The Scotsmen draw in closer around each base, swords, metal helmets and other accoutrements clinking. Lenny dodges a hard pitch aimed at his legs and struts angrily over to the dugout. A few guys call out teasing encouragement, "Get mad Nails!" But a lot of us are getting nervous, expecting the umps or one of the commissioners to come down and straighten things out. Lenny and the pitcher face off again; I expect to hear a war-cry burst from Macbeth, who is waiting, sword held high over his head with both hands, emanating rage. Lenny looks desperately over to the dugout, where the whole team is on its feet now.

from TALES FROM THE NEXT VILLAGE

Pi Tz'u and Hsiang 'Ai, man and wife, loved as much as mortals can, but what flowed from him to her in love made her allergic. All the village's sympathy was not consolation, but love was. Love was something of a consolation.

When Pi Tz'u died of natural causes, the village sighed, that quality of sigh one hears when the ill or elderly are mercifully taken, that breathy sound that serves also as a clearing of the throat to open the way for gossip.

"At last," they said, "Hsiang 'Ai is free to find another, a love without side effects, an untainted bliss," though there were those who argued the pattern would repeat. They said this with the same breath in which they talked about the weather. And with every storm, they reminded each other that Pi Tz'u's spirit was mixed with all the other spirits that rained upon the earth.

"What mortals do for love," they said to each other, clicking their tongues, remembering the couple's sacrifice, and then someone would speculate about whether acupuncture would have helped, and then there would be silence for a while.

The village children, certain that there were more wondrous things in this world than talk, were always seeking diversion, often getting into mischief in the process. During storms they were particularly restless. They preferred the rain to their parents' chatter, and left, but didn't dare disclose to their elders what they had stumbled upon, what so compelled them that they repeated the pilgrimage during every storm thereafter. They would have been severely scolded, perhaps even beaten if they had reported what they saw: Hsiang 'Ai in the sodden field, her thighs splayed like butterfly wings, white wings gently opening and closing while the rose that hinged them blinked in the rain.