

*Brian Carey Chung*

## **SIGNS IN THE BACKYARD**



O papaya tree      fertility goddess      for heaven  
                                  where is my mother?

I have waited in the yard a whole heap of sunrises,  
                                  until I swear  
 the banana tree is Moses coming down the mountain  
                                  with a commandment  
 of bananas, telling me to lighten up myself and laugh.  
                                  Her grapefruit tree  
 must be her Chini joke for the Burning Bush: its shag  
                                  aflame with yellow  
 fruit exploding amid the bitter vines of cerasse.  
                                  I have come to  
 in a shed of primordial ferns, sorrel, scotch bonnet,  
                                  juvenile bizzy nut,  
 amid barbecue grills, African violets, soursop,  
                                  watching the crawl  
 of pumpkin tendrils hug a lone breadfruit on a table.  
                                  I have come knocking  
 like sun on a fluxy mango      useless      unheard      too late.  
                                  If death were a field  
 of sugarcane, I am a mongoose burning a trail through  
                                  its snake-ridden heart

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                                 Imagined or real,  
 at home and abroad, I wait for answers in this yard.  
                                  Yesterdays' renal  
 failures      Angelou Hallmark cards      rotting fruit of progress,

an inward journey  
manifested as water retention. And who's to say  
private progress must  
come through hospital monitors as "normal?" Hepatic  
failure critical and not  
good better hour. I try to shift my howling mother.  
Two teaspoons of urine  
in three days is all that can be risen. She wakes to what  
she never said this is.  
This is a slow drowning over months. The monitor's beep  
is a garbage truck  
in reverse, and she jokes, *who do they think they are taking  
to the dumps?*, back in the room.  
The only relief is to stand. No standing either.  
Where I am, sunlight  
forces to the interior of a pumpkin blossom

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Game face Needle torture  
NPO Nothing By Mouth Nothing by land or sea either.  
*how how how or help?*  
I cannot tell if my mother is trying to ask me  
how, or if she's reaching  
between great intervals of breath for the rough cords of help  
disappearing.  
Unable to find a healthy vein. Tears before mind can  
acknowledge its cry.  
Compartmentalizing dread into little logic cubes.  
So much bloating now,  
bending is implausible. Aromatherapy  
hurts. Too much pain  
to be touched. Withdrawn from the self-administered pain pump.  
*wow wow wow*  
I stand on my head. I am tied to an invisible tree.  
No more lying down now.  
She wakes, opens her eyes wide, smiles, seeing me, says, *Hi, Brian!*

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I go back through her flowers to when she asked if I knew  
of a way to help her  
breathe better. Imagine! Us there everlastingly tied  
like punished gods  
to the rock, to life. She—circling the island unwilling to leave  
deliriously calling out  
*Jamaica, Jamaica, Jamaica*—changed to bird of prey  
waiting for the body,  
the dark matter, to feast. —when she died no longer looking  
like my mother,  
but someone else's, like that first bright morning when they

took her away from  
her mother to clean her up, and switched her with another,  
and we lost our baby....

When we peered down into the carriage, we all had our doubts.

What was there to do  
but believe that frown was hers? —as though she went disapproving  
of life, her arms crossed  
against it, clutching a rattle of freshly cut roses.