

JANELLE GARCIA

Ashes

After Marguerite Yourcenar's *Fires*

I was sure the feeding tube meant three more years, he tells us. We glance at each other, my sister and I, embarrassed that he held tight to such a delusion. Or embarrassed, perhaps, that we held onto such little hope. Because our whole lives, you were set on going. It was all you ever talked about. This year, you swore to us each passing year, is the year that is sure to be my last. And so this year, inevitably, you were right.

How did he feel, I often wonder, when you made such proclamations?

As your granddaughter, I always resented it—your hurry to leave us all behind. Though I did grow numb to it eventually. That is, until this year when I could see ample evidence that your body had finally surrendered to your will.

Alcyone:

Ceyx mentioned taking the trip in passing several times, often in jest. “Keep nagging me like that, woman, and I’ll take to the sea.” He’d hold her tight and whisper the words into her ear, and she could smell his breath each time. This is what the inside of him does to the air, she’d think. His body transforms the air he breathes into something warm, something that is unmistakably him, the way a cave does, and she’d wish she could live there, wherever that place was inside of him, where he stilled the salty air and gave it life.

It was his way of testing her reaction, she knows now, though at the time, she pushed the thought of him sailing away far out of her mind, refusing to acknowledge what she considered empty threats. Because he knew how she felt about the sea. News reports of cruise ships being tossed onto their sides by rogue waves paralyzed her; she’d sit in front of the television and watch video clips of unsuspecting passengers crashing into ice sculptures and lounge chairs, all the while wondering aloud why anyone would ever think a Caribbean cruise was a good idea. On windy nights, when the crashing waves kept her awake and the salty air clouded their apartment windows, Alcyone would retreat to the stairwell, where she’d try to read, but find herself thinking about storm surges and tsunamis and hurricanes instead. And her nightmares were always the same—the ocean churned and frothed and swelled, covering the beachside cafes and the parking lots and the playgrounds before climbing over the houses and the grocery stores and the tops of the tallest apartment buildings, swallowing them all.

Maybe that was why he set his mind on going, she tries telling herself—because she always seemed to react so mildly whenever he mentioned it. She tells herself this because if she thinks too much about how aware he was of her fears, his decision to go will start to feel like a betrayal. And if she starts blaming him, she might start hating him. And if she starts hating him,

she might lose hope.

Now, she only blames herself. She blames herself and hates herself and she can feel the hate poisoning her, eating away at the marrow of her bones, making her hair fall out in big, oily clumps. She often wonders if she'd begged him, upon his first offhand mention of getting on that ship, if she'd fallen to his feet and professed how much she loved him, if she'd told him how certain she was that taking to the sea spelled certain death, if maybe then, he would have stayed. Instead, she waited for the day when he began packing his things to take him at his word.

As he went along, quietly making all the necessary preparations for his voyage, she trailed him, questioning his love for her, making it seem as if his need to visit the oracle was really about a lack of devotion to her.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked; she regretted having asked that question almost instantly because she didn't want reassurance; she just wanted him to stay. But still she went on in spite of herself, asking, "How can a devoted husband even consider leaving the wife he claims to love? Do you truly think I am a nag? Are you leaving just to get away from me?"

She regrets all of that now. All she managed to do was present him with baseless arguments, after all. She and Ceyx both knew how much he loved her, how devoted to her he was. As soon as he reassured Alcyone that he loved her, there was nothing left for her to say. And, as a result, her last ditch effort to keep him moored by insisting that he take her with him was more easily rebuffed. If his trip was truly as dangerous as Alcyone insisted, how could he, a loving and devoted husband, ever take her along? No, there was no way he could do that. So the only solution was for both of them to agree that the trip could not be as treacherous as she feared—her unfounded hysterics were easily silenced.

And so now, despite her worst fears, despite that cold shard that began pressing into the pit of her stomach the day that Ceyx left and has only grown, with each passing day, into a jagged thing as large and splintered as a broken plank of wood; Alcyone paces the shoreline each day, searching for Ceyx's flying sails on the horizon, wishing she could sprout wings, somehow, and glide out above the sea in search of a small breeze, just the tiniest gasp of air, that is warm and sweet and perfectly still.

Without you, our grandfather ambles through uncertain days. The scaffolds of feeding times and nurses' visits and intermittent sleep are carried off with your hospital-issue bed, your cases of fortified meal supplements. At once, minutes and half hours and whole days begin to sag and collapse.

"Sixty years," he repeats to me, "we were married sixty years," though I know that is not accurate. I nod because what difference does it make—sixty years or fifty-six?

The people who know him, who knew you, warn my mother and me. Watch him, they tell us. After so many years together, he's likely to follow her.

Orpheus:

Hell is this place he thinks, as he spends his days and nights there, all of them melting together into a ceaseless stream of fluorescent lights and blank faces. He can't remember how long ago it was that they took her there, her body tiny on the stretcher, her lips pale and still.

"Eurydice," he repeats over and over, always to a different person, always to the same phantom-stare. "I am looking for my wife, Eurydice."

Each time they shrug, and he spells her name out for them. "No, it's e u r y," he intones, leaning over semi-circular desks or craning his head into small frosted-glass windows.

The tubes of light cast spectral glows on them all; each hand that points him down a different hallway is the hand of a ghost. And each hallway that he follows seems to descend into a place where air is just a rumor, where only silence and industrial grade disinfectant fill his lungs.

He avoids peering inside the rooms where machines bleat and bodies are silent. He is afraid he'll see Eurydice in one of those mechanical beds, her eyes half-open, her life drained into an empty IV bag.

When he can't go on, he sleeps on plastic chairs, on chairs with metal backs and bolts that snag his clothes, and when his clothes tear, he has to fight the urge to tear them some more, to claw at his clothes and then his skin and then everything underneath his skin until there's nothing left of him but the sliver of gold around his finger.

Awake, he dreams of three-headed dogs that hang their heads when he passes and of spiral rivers that coil around the earth like vipers. He cries out for Eurydice and sings her name into the dark. In his dreams, even the Furies weep for her.

And then one day, he finally reaches the place where they know her, where they give him answers. He's sure it's been weeks, though it may have only been days or mere hours. There's a chance she may recover, they finally tell him. They are working hard to bring her back so that he can take her home.

"But be patient," they say. "These things cannot be guaranteed nor can they be rushed. Continue to expect the worse while hoping for the best." But Orpheus is not one for tentative faith; he cannot abide by so much uncertainty. Each prescription he second-guesses. He struggles to embody cautious optimism and forge ahead, but each moment that seems like a step forward tempts Orpheus to look back.

Later, when Eurydice succumbs for the second time, Orpheus finds he can no longer stand the sight of other people going about their days, complaining, talking to each other, laughing. *Their eyes are too bright*, he thinks, *and their skin is obscene*.

Whenever he passes a woman on the street, he can't help staring at the ground and grinding his teeth. His thoughts turn to black, and the only music he makes is for death.

It is a shock, he tells us, to wake up each morning without her there. We know, we tell him, but we really don't. We're women living in other cities with our own spouses and children. We're accustomed to not seeing you every day, to not talking to you, to not thinking about you at all, sometimes for days at a time.

We watch him closely in the days that follow, urging him to wake, to eat, to wash, to look up, to sit down. A slice of pizza, a sip of water, a clean shirt, a kiss from his great-grandson, a dirty joke, an unripe mango plucked from his own tree. None of these make the smiling man smile. When we talk to him, he looks away.

A month later, he still doesn't smile, but he agrees to watch the television sometimes, even if he'll only watch the nature channel. During the day, he keeps busy trimming his trees and feeding the doves that roost in the neighbor's poinciana tree. With time, we find the need to call him daily presses less and less, but we call anyway.

Sometimes, when I wait for someone to pick up on the other end, I expect to hear your voice. It's a small moment that comes with a jolt of fresh grief, but I know it's nothing next to the bolt of lightning that sears him each morning when, caught between sleep and wakefulness, he is convinced, in that fraction of time, that you'll be there.