

Salt and Ashes

*It seems the wound might exist to uncover
the salt, the anger, the petulance we hoard
cell by cell, treasure the body can bury.*

—William Matthews, “Wrong”

I want to scream *Cancer* in a crowded theater. I want to see the cancer cops. I’ll yell *Cancer*, and someone will call the emergency number, and they’ll come for me. I’ll be given a sedative. The oncology nurse moonlighting as arresting officer will take me by the arm, lead me to the ambulance—pink lights flashing, Indian elephant bells mediating traffic—and then the cell, the sentence: six more months of chemo and a restraining order on my mouth.

I am petulant and angry.
I should have been redeemed by my suffering,
grown mellower, wiser, saintly. I hear that can happen.
I’m working on my attitude. I know it’s wrong
to eat too much salt, even if the chemical stream—
that Borgia cocktail which may also save me—
has stripped my tongue of taste buds, all but the ones
for salt and ashes. I taste ashes. I crave salt. Salty ashes.

My body is a California wild fire, contained.
I have been promised the fertile soil and regeneration
that follow flames. Someday, if they’re right, I will burst
into a blooming field of daffodils.

Judith Ortiz Cofer