

For Ángel, The Ocean

ANALÍA VILLAGRA

Maite winces. The programs in her hand have slipped, slicing into her palm. Beads of blood well up inside the cut, and she presses her hand into her dress. Blood on black. No one will notice. With her other hand, she fans the programs out on the front table and arranges pens next to the guestbook that her mother will throw away without reading. Dozens of ghost-white lilies shoot from heavy glass vases set all around the house. Her mother places a large photograph of Maite's younger brother on the bureau.

"This picture is old," her mother says. "Your Tío Jaime picked it."

Not that old, Maite thinks. Ángel must be in his early twenties, though she can't remember exactly when he had his hair cut that short. Maite has a mental inventory of more recent images—his hair long and unwashed, the stretched-out collar of his T-shirt hanging over sharp collarbones, his pupils sucked into tight pins and gazing out at nothing.

"Jesus, Maite," her mother says, scowling at the streak of blood drying at Maite's hip. Ángel might have killed himself, but Maite knows that she is still

the disappointing child. And she will continue to disappoint, while the memory of her brother is rolled smooth and shiny like a piece of sea glass.

“What is this junk?” Her mother gestures to a collection of objects arranged at the base of the photo—a few shells, a sand dollar, a small glass jar full of sand.

Her mother runs her fingers over the display, and Maite flinches at each gentle tap of nail against shell. All his life, Ángel had loved spending time at the beach—playing, reading, swimming, smoking, sleeping. Their mother hated sand.

“It’s the beach, the ocean,” Maite says. “He wanted . . .”

“He what?” Her mother stiffens.

“For his ashes. He said . . .”

“Why would he say that?”

“At Dad’s funeral, it just came up.”

Her mother says nothing, and her accusatory silence makes Maite defensive.

“He never said anything else. Not to me.” Maite watches a simmering just below the surface of her mother’s skin before she turns and walks away. Maite exhales.

Six years ago, during the interminable after-party (as Ángel called it) of their father’s funeral, she and Ángel ducked through the crowd to sit on the edge of the pool in the backyard, their legs dangling into the water. The sky was mostly dark, lined with faint creases of orange from the setting sun. The water and the tropical night air were so warm they could only tell their legs were submerged by fluttering them up and down and watching the wakes of pale blue stream behind their heels. Ángel passed her a joint.

“When I’m dead,” he said, “I want to be tossed over the ocean.”

“Don’t be morbid,” Maite said.

“I’m just saying. Sounds nice, right? Floating out and away for eternity.”

“You’re stoned.”

“Still. Sounds nice.”

Maite wonders if even then Ángel felt dark waves crashing against him, a current sucking at his limbs. Or maybe despair came later, after years of escalating chemical self-abuse. Her eyes flick to the front door, as if he’ll walk in any moment. His absence is still an abstraction. The door stays closed, and to

her shame she is relieved. Late-night calls, police stations, emergency rooms—Ángel's whole cadaverous existence exhausted her, and she has been grieving for a long time.

Somber guests begin to arrive, paternal relatives and friends whom Maite hasn't seen in ages, not since her father's funeral. She thinks she may have worn the same dress. She accepts stiff hugs from her cousins and solemn handshakes from Ángel's high school friends. Neither Maite nor her mother had any idea how to track down his more current associates, and neither had tried. Her father's aunts and sisters wrap their arms around Maite's mother, rocking her back and forth like they have seen sorrow wedged deep in her ribs and with their sturdy grip can loosen and shake it to the floor.

"Thank you for coming," her mother says flatly when they release her.

Maite sees the women shake their heads. Now is not the time to criticize, but they have always found her mother cold. Maite avoids them by going to the kitchen to pull a tray of sliced meats from the refrigerator. She sets the food on the sideboard in the living room, then stands in front of the photograph of her brother. She runs her hand over a conch. She'd picked it up on Sanibel Island when they were young and thought she'd lost it—that is, until yesterday when she found it in Ángel's old room. "Goddamn thief," she says to herself, thinking as much about the shell as about the necklace he took from her bathroom counter four months ago. A fake, costume jewelry. She'd set him up. He called her a bitch when he couldn't pawn it, then showed up two days later to apologize.

"Shit, Maite, I don't know what to do."

Maite didn't know, either, but she wouldn't let him back into her apartment.

"You don't even own anything valuable," he said with stoic good humor that stung more than the obscenities.

Maite nods at the steady stream of people—shapes circulating around the house. Her eyes can't seem to focus enough to make out any features. Their voices, too, are indistinct—murmured memories of Ángel and stories about days past. Mid-morning bleeds into afternoon. When people finally start to leave, Maite

watches the shivers of heat distort the air around the door each time it opens, the figures blurring like smeared ink as they melt out of the house. It isn't until her mother starts to carry half-empty trays of food back into the kitchen that Maite realizes her father's younger brother is still there.

"I'll take the garbage out," Jaime says.

Her mother nods.

"Hey, Mom?"

Her mother looks up.

"Look, it's none of my business, but you and Tío Jaime . . ."

"No," she says. "It's not your business."

They scrape leftovers into old takeout containers and load the dishwasher.

Jaime returns and gently runs his hand down her mother's arm. "Luz, why don't you go lie down. We can finish here."

He brushes a silvery gray hair out of her eyes and tucks it into her thick, dark braid. Maite feels like an intruder and looks away. Once her mother has disappeared down the hall, Maite opens her mouth to make an excuse, closes it, and leaves Jaime in the kitchen with piles of serving dishes and partially eaten food.

Maite has to make a few trips from the car to her apartment to unload the sympathy plants people gave her mother. Death plants, her mother called them, and made Maite pack them into her trunk. It's not the first time this has happened. When Maite's father died, well-meaning friends and neighbors showered her mother with greenery. They knew Luz loved plants. But after the memorial service, her mother grabbed Maite's arm.

"Make them disappear," she whispered to the space over Maite's shoulder, like she was ordering an assassination. "You should keep that bonsai, though. It's nice."

Later, her mother began advising extended family and friends that they, too, should dispose of their haunted plants, and she offered Maite's removal services. Maite does not remember when she started asking to take them home, cringing each time and hoping that someone would say no.

Small pots consume every windowsill in her apartment. Banana crotons and bromeliads crowd the narrow concrete balcony, and gardenias line the floor in front of the sliding glass doors. The bookshelf in the living room has a small stack of paperbacks on the middle shelf; the rest of the space is overtaken by plants. A pothos plant lives on the coffee table. A kalanchoe shares a wooden chair with an ivy whose tendrils curl up the rails of the back and down the legs like it wants to strangle it. She has azaleas and ferns, basil and rosemary. All death plants—six years of accumulation. She only knows their names because they come with little plastic stakes that label them and delineate their needs—full sun, partial shade, moist soil. She hates them even though she continues to bring new ones home. She remembers where each one came from—Abuela’s funeral, Dad’s cousin Claudia, her cousin Felix, her friends’ parents, the baby her friend Esme lost. Maite went to Esme’s hospital room, meaning to hug her friend and tell her she was so sorry, but instead she asked if she could take a little African violet home. The words sprang out of her mouth before she could stop them, and Esme hasn’t spoken to her since.

Only once did Maite go to a stranger’s funeral just to take a plant. It was Ángel’s idea.

“This shit is creepy,” he said when the collection started growing, leaves of all shapes and shades amassing on every flat surface in Maite’s apartment. “Like a mausoleum.”

“You mean an arboretum?”

He shrugged.

“Mom started it. She had me deal with the plants after Dad.”

“Throw them out.”

“I . . . I can’t.”

“You have a problem,” he said.

Maite waited for him to smile or wink. He didn’t.

A few weeks later, he dragged her to the back of a church in Little Haiti. A funeral service was ending, and they slipped into a pew, unseen amid wails of sorrow that leapt like flares from the congregation. The place fell silent when a

small white-haired woman in the front row stood up and touched her hand to the gleaming wood of the casket. The whole church held its breath, watching her tiny shoulders heave up and down. One, two, three, four. The woman turned, finally, to a man beside her. He nodded and with a flick of his hand called five other men to him. They lifted the coffin and carried it down the center aisle.

“Time to go all in, sis,” Ángel whispered, nudging Maite off their bench.

The sad strangers followed the body and the widow to a caravan of cars out front, and Ángel kept watch while Maite scooped up one of the small palms from beside the casket stand. They left through a side door and hurried back to Maite’s car, where she burst into tears, the plant in her lap tapping the steering wheel in rhythm with her ragged breaths. In the passenger seat, Ángel counted out twenty-three dollars he’d taken from an old woman’s purse without the woman or his sister noticing. He asked Maite to drop him at a corner store on Seventy-First Street. She watched him slip the cash to a man out front, stuff something into his pocket, and walk away like he’d forgotten about her altogether.

Usually, Maite left the plants in whatever plastic containers they came in, not even bothering to remove the stiff black bows or crinkly cellophane wrapping, but for the stolen palm she bought a ceramic pot from an art fair. The base resembled folds of beige lace, and the wide, glossy lip was the murky green of the distant ocean on an overcast day. She turned the plant regularly so it could catch new angles from the sun. She played Bach from her laptop speakers because she’d read that music helped plants grow. She even started composting in a plastic tub filled with worms she kept under her kitchen sink. The writhing of the skinny red bodies unnerved her, and each time she popped open the top to add apple cores or to collect the nutrient rich soil to add to the pots, it felt like penance. The palm thrived, robust as Maite’s guilt.

She places a new cyclamen from Ángel’s wake on the bookshelf and an orchid on the kitchen counter next to the bonsai. She sets a horrid calla lily from one of her father’s sisters on the floor. It’s so ugly she hopes it dies. She runs her hand over the broad, glossy leaves and pictures them shriveling. She would like

to believe that she could get rid of it if she wanted, but when she thinks of carrying it to the dumpster, her chest tightens, and she can't breathe.

She pulls a stack of papers from the kitchen counter—Ángel's bank statement (\$2.97 remaining in checking), his car insurance, his student loan, a cell phone plan, a credit card. Death is not an end but the beginning of a long list of tasks. Their mother is Ángel's next of kin, but when she tried to close the first account, she only got as far as, "My son."

"Your son, ma'am?" said the robotically polite voice on the other end of the line. "Ma'am? Your son?"

"My son," she said, "my son."

Maite took the phone and figured out where to fax the death certificate. When she hung up and said the account was closed, her mother closed her eyes and sucked a breath through her teeth.

"Well, aren't you in a hurry to erase your brother," she said.

Now Maite sits on her couch and makes call after call, scribbling down fax numbers and addresses, preparing to send Ángel's death certificate far and wide. She wants to fold a copy into an origami sailboat and release it into the ocean. She imagines dates and names floating away on the tide, disintegrating in the briny water until her brother is nothing but letters and numbers—1 ... A ... 9 ... 8 ... n ... 4 ... g—bobbing through algae blooms and colonizing the crevices between broken shells and fish bones at the bottom of the sea.

His apartment is straightforward. Maite has been paying Ángel's rent for years; it helped her to know that no matter what, he had a place to sleep. She worked out a month-to-month arrangement, so she calls the landlord and says that Ángel has moved, even though the landlord lives in the apartment complex, so he must know what happened. After she hangs up, she realizes she said "moved on" instead of "moved out." She pretends for a moment that this is true, that her brother has thrown a pack of cigarettes and his board shorts into a duffle bag and found a way to start over.

The next day, Maite stops at her mother's house so they can collect Ángel's ashes together. The heat is not unpleasant yet, and the sky is unrelentingly

bright. Her mother is already outside. She wears all black, which she will continue to do for months in atavistic mourning. She looks severe and elegant. Slowly she works her way toward the car—examining the blooming flowers that line her walkway, brushing invisible flecks of dirt from the leaves of a recently transplanted shrub, wending a serpentine path through her garden. When she finally settles into the passenger seat, she asks to make a stop at Enriquita's. The house is bursting with leftovers, she says, but she is desperate for a *cubano*. She rakes her red nails against her neck as she talks. They leave thin pink trails like faded war paint.

Maite isn't hungry. At the restaurant, she orders coffee and watches her mother unhinge her jaw around the mass of ham and slab of melted cheese pressed inside the grilled bread. Her mother holds the sandwich delicately, with the tips of her fingers, and dabs at her mouth with thin, waxy paper napkins.

"Say what you want about my Ángel, he was always well put together."

"Excuse me?" Maite is not sure how long her mother has been talking.

"Your brother always made an effort when we went out. Look at you." Her tone is a caress that does not match her words. She fans her grease-glittering fingers toward Maite's jeans and Hurricanes T-shirt.

Their mother was always an apologist for Ángel, refusing to acknowledge the troubling pattern in his behavior, but Maite cleaned him up too many times to share her mother's willful blindness. She stares at the crumpled napkins on her mother's empty plate. Smears of lipstick have liquefied in the grease spots, leaving gruesome red streaks. The tabletop looks like a crime scene. Her mother stacks a few bills on the table, but she doesn't get up to leave until Maite apologizes for her clothes.

Once they arrive at the funeral home, it takes only a few minutes to receive the ashes and the bland words of comfort that accompany them, but they sit for a long time in the ornate Victorian chairs with the rock-hard upholstery. The lobby is refrigerated and dimly lit, and the wide faux-marble tiles are accented with dense maroon rugs. Maite's mother clenches her hands around the urn in her lap and sits as inert as a marble column. Despite her rigid posture, she

is exhausted. Slender red threads radiate through the white around her black irises, and the skin beneath her eyes is the dusky, bruised purple of a ripe fig. Maite thinks maybe she should touch her mother's shoulder and say something meaningful, but she keeps her hands in her lap and waits.

The day Ángel died, Maite cried so violently she dry heaved over her toilet. Then she crawled into bed and slept for eighteen hours. She slept ten hours the following day and twelve the day after that. Each evening now, she slips into deep, dreamless sleep, but instead of feeling well rested, she wakes with a sandpaper tongue and a knot of shame in her gut. Ángel is dead, and she is not in agony. She isn't even awake.

After twenty minutes, the receptionist becomes visibly agitated. She stops by with increasing frequency to offer them tissues or a glass of water or whatever they need, until Maite takes the hint and guides her mother out of the cave-like cold and into the sticky heat of midday. They squint into the sunlight. Their skin blooms goosebumps. She thinks she sees her mother rock the urn in the crook of her arm, but maybe she's just trembling because the stone is chilled and heavy.

"We'll scatter them tomorrow," her mother says.

"Mom, I'd . . ."

"You'd what? What would you like, exactly?"

Maite looks out at the road. Their mother never made Ángel this nervous. "For Ángel, the ocean . . ."

"What about it?"

"The ocean made him happy."

When her mother says nothing, she continues. "I think we should take the ashes there."

"Really?" Her mother's lips barely move. "And you knew him so well? So well you couldn't even stop him . . ."

Maite freezes, a small, wide-eyed animal trying to disappear into the shadows until danger has passed.

Her mother considers Maite with bald contempt. "He should be with his father. Don't come if you don't want to. I don't need you there."

Maite drives her mother home. Her uncle's Tercel is parked in the driveway.

"Does Tío Jaime live here?"

"Thanks for the lift."

Her mother gets out of the car and slams the door. Jaime waits for her in the entryway and eases the urn from her arms. He waves to Maite, but she pretends not to notice and drives away.

Maite returns to her mother's house early the next morning. Jaime's car is gone, and her mother stands in the driveway alone with the urn. Without greeting, she slides into the car and lobs directions at Maite—left here, right, right again—until they drive through the stucco entryway of a motel on Calle Ocho. The concrete walls flake faded pink chips, and the trim around the doors and windows is agèd gray with memories of a turquoise youth. Jaime appears from a door on the first floor wearing a short-sleeved button-down shirt and threadbare khakis. Maite raises an eyebrow.

"He's staying here," her mother says without looking at her. "Are you happy?"

Maite decides not to ask what happened to his apartment in Homestead. She looks instead at the cheap rayon motel curtains and remembers pulling Ángel out of a room not far from here, a room filled with bodies in acrid, narcotic sleep. Bottles, needles, chunky stains on the carpet.

"Hey, deciding to live a little, sis?" he'd said. His eyes wouldn't quite open. He'd already forgotten pocket dialing, answering her return call, and muttering a string of syllables that included the name of the motel.

She folded his jellied body into her car and taken him home, changed him into sweatpants and a clean shirt. Twenty-nine years old, like a rag doll. Maite lay down on top of the sheets next to him in his bed and woke a few hours later with the dawn.

"Don't tell Mom," he murmured as she left the room.

So many memories, but Maite still can't identify the exact moment she failed to save her brother.

Tío Jaime gets into the back seat. Her mother asks about his room.

"It's fine. I'm quite comfortable," he says with practiced stoicism.

Her mother tsks her tongue lightly against her teeth and shakes her head. Maite wants to leave them both on the side of the highway and drive to the beach with her brother's urn. There, she'd pour saltwater into the ashes and paint her face with the mud. She'd skip down Ocean Drive and gnash her teeth at rosy, blistered tourists, knowing that she'd be featured in the highlight reel of their tropical vacation alongside the art deco hotels and skimpy bikinis. She would run back over the dunes and sit in the waves until she couldn't tell if the grit on her face was salt or sand or tiny charred fragments of her brother's bones.

Instead, they drive away from the ocean, west on Route 41. The road is a taut scar on a rippling grassy skin that stretches beneath the clear sky. Maite drives exactly the speed limit and watches cars behind her close the distance, whoosh past, and fade into tiny specks that blink away on the horizon. Jaime hums to himself, and Maite can feel the rhythmic tap of his knee against the back of her seat. She's surprised her mother hasn't whipped around to demand quiet. Maybe she can't hear him from the passenger seat.

Her mother used to bring them to the Everglades all the time when they were kids. She gave them field guides and binoculars, and they moaned about the heat and the bugs. When she helped them into child-sized waders, they lamented the unfairness of having to miss the neighbor's pool party. In the swamp, their mother was patient with them. She pointed out invasive species, commented on water levels, explained soil erosion and nutrient pollution. When it was time to leave, she would give one last wistful look at the sunset over the grass, then shed the dreamy tenderness on the drive home, emerging from the car icy and aloof once again.

They come to an abandoned clapboard rest stop with gray planks covering the windows, and Maite turns onto the gravel road running beside it. A hawk sits on the branch of a dead tree surrounded by waves of sawgrass. Maite turns off the air and opens their windows in time to hear the bird's indignant shriek as it flies off. They pass clusters of cypress trees, knobby knees spiking out of the water and pressing into one another like old couples playing footsy beneath the bingo table. The air is dense and humid and has the warm, sour smell of decomposition she knows her mother loves. The last time they'd made this trip the urn

contained her father, and it was Ángel who sat in the back. Maite can see Jaime shifting with discomfort, sweat bulging out of his pores and bursting in fractal patterns on his shirt. She catches his eye in the rearview mirror and silently dares him to complain. He looks away. They pull over next to a trailhead, and her mother gets out of the car.

“This is too heavy,” she says, shifting the urn in her arms. “Do you have anything else?”

“There might be some bags in the back,” Maite says, popping the trunk but making no move to get up.

Her mother places the urn in the passenger seat and waits next to the rear door. Jaime shuffles out. “Man, I haven’t been out to the Everglades in ages,” he says. “Went to one of those alligator shows a few years ago, and wow! Wild.”

Maite waits for the hiss of contempt to slither from her mother’s lips, but she says nothing.

“Luz, are you sure about this?” Jaime rests his hands on her shoulders and gestures to the tangled confusion of plants with his chin. “You really want to leave him *here*?”

Now, Maite thinks, pulling a plastic sandwich bag from her pocket. She almost feels sorry for her uncle. But her mother just walks to the back of the car to rifle through the trunk, and Jaime follows her. Maite’s fingers are thick and lazy with the heat, but she fumbles them in and out of the urn before her mother returns. Her mother empties the ashes into a creased cloth grocery bag, slings the bag over her shoulder, and disappears onto the trail. Maite knows where she is headed. Two hundred yards up, the muddy path drops off into a deep pool dotted with lily pads and broad lances of alligator flag. Six years ago, she and Ángel had stood ankle deep in marsh water and watched their mother empty their father’s ashes over the dark denim water. Ángel didn’t want to be there then, and he wouldn’t want to be here now, so Maite waits in the car. Jaime makes a half-hearted movement toward the trail, but reconsiders and returns to the back seat.

“So, you live with Mom now?” Maite says. She looks at him in the rearview mirror, but he stares out at the swamp.

“Let’s not do this.” He wriggles, trying to change positions in his seat, but the sticky air pastes him to the upholstery.

“Do you even have an apartment anymore?”

Jaime opens his mouth to say something, closes it again, and shakes his head. “She wants to talk to you herself. I’d like to respect your mother’s wishes.”

“Respect?” She chokes a little on the word.

“What do you want from me, Maite?”

She turns, finally, to look at him directly. Sweat beads his forehead like a rash. “I want you to move the fuck out of your dead brother’s house.”

He flinches, like she’s hit him, and they sit in silence until her mother returns to the car with her empty bag. Her shoes leave squishy black clods on the floor mat, and the rich scent of organic decay fills the car. They drive back with the windows open. No one comments when they pass the motel, and Maite drops them both off at her mother’s house.

Maite’s phone rings. Ángel’s landlord needs her to come to the apartment and clear out his things. She thinks she says “no problem” before she hangs up, but in the verdant stillness of her living room she isn’t sure if the echo of her voice is all in her head. She puts a hand broom into a cracked plastic bucket along with a pair of rubber gloves and a few black garbage bags. She can’t remember if Ángel’s place is carpeted, but she has no intention of stopping at her mother’s house for the vacuum cleaner.

When she arrives at her brother’s apartment complex, Maite stands next to her car and stares out at the parking lot. She was last here a week ago. She’d finally decided she had to stop paying Ángel’s rent. She’d called the night before and asked to take him out for breakfast so she could break the news to him in person. She was nervous about what to say. When he didn’t answer his door and didn’t answer his phone, her nerves cramped. Maybe he’d guessed what this was about and thought he could delay the inevitable by avoiding her. She stepped away from his door and looked around.

His car was parked in its space across the lot—papers, books, and a

sweatshirt visible in the rear dash. She wondered if he would end up living out of his car. He'd threatened as much the year before when she'd half-heartedly pointed out that she couldn't afford to support him forever. That wouldn't really be so bad. He'd probably spend his days at the beach, maybe even sleep out there. Fresh air. The sound of waves. She would let him stay with her during hurricanes. Not so bad. She thought she saw a shape behind the wheel and walked over.

"Come on, seriously?" she muttered. His seat was tilted back. He was slumped, asleep, in the driver's seat. She raised her fist to bang on the window but dropped her arm before it hit the glass. He was so, so still.

"Ángel?" Her fingers scrabbled at the door handle. When she finally got it open, her brother's left arm tumbled off the arm rest, the needle clinging to the pit of his elbow like a burr.

A neighbor must have called 911, because all Maite remembered next was sitting on the curb while the paramedics maneuvered Ángel's stiff limbs out of the car and onto a stretcher. It looked like he'd been there most of the night, one of them told her. She got into her car and followed the ambulance to the hospital. When she arrived, she was handed forms, pamphlets, instructions by scurrying medical personnel, and directed to a chair, its faded gray cushion deflated by many hours of anxious waiting. She sat, until new people—the same people?—came out from behind swinging staff-only doors to talk to her.

They'd found a note addressed to Maite in Ángel's pocket. They told her that they believed his death had not been accidental, and they handed her the folded piece of notebook paper in a clear plastic bag like it was evidence or a biohazard. Maite locked herself in a bathroom stall and sat, fully dressed, on the toilet with the note resting in her lap. When she held it up to the fluorescents overhead, she could see the shadow of Ángel's scrawl inside. She slid the note from the thick plastic pouch and ran her fingers over the topography of her name on the outside. "For Maite," embossed in blue Bic. Her brother always pressed too hard with his pen. Somewhere in his apartment was a black and

white composition book with the ghost of this note, the text carved into the soft fibers of the succeeding page. She imagined countless variations of the contents—shifting ratios of guilt, apology, confession, blame. But it didn't matter what the note said. It changed nothing. Maite crumpled it in her fist and stuffed it into the little tin meant for tampon applicators and feminine pads.

In the parking lot of her brother's apartment complex, Maite stands next to her car. She holds Ángel's apartment key in her hand, but she cannot take her eyes from his empty parking space. She sees a dark spot, and she imagines his bodily fluids seeping out of the car and staining the asphalt. It's just oil, though. She drives home. There is nothing of his that she wants. She'll call the landlord tomorrow to tell him, or she'll just stop taking his calls and let him keep her security deposit.

She opens the door to her own apartment, the bare white walls burnt golden by the afternoon sun flooding in through the glass doors of the patio. The plants glow, spectral in the light. The teeming leaves are green whispers, green cackles, green shrieks that fill the loud silence and ricochet off the walls.

She pulls the crumpled baggie holding her brother's ashes from her pocket and thinks of the ocean, of wading out past the surf and flinging ash like rice at a wedding. The grit would catch the sunlight for a moment, then sink into the warm, salty sea, dissolving into something primordial and pure. She wonders which pieces of him she has—toenails, patella, the charred remnants of a deltoid?

She hasn't actually been to the beach with her brother since senior year in high school. It was the last day of finals, but Maite was already done with her exams. She let Ángel convince her to take the bus to South Beach instead of school. It was uncomfortably hot, and neither of them had bathing suits, but they sat in the sand, stood up to their thighs in the waves, and ate hot dogs that Maite bought and candy that Ángel shoplifted. When they got home, their mother was furious.

"How could you let your brother miss his English final? The school called,

you know. He might have to repeat freshman year.”

Maite didn't know, hadn't thought to ask.

The ocean fades, Ángel fades, and Maite is alone, surrounded by her otherworldly jungle. She stands in front of the stolen palm and carefully empties her brother's ashes around its base. She pours water over the plant and watches coarse, gray ash and bits of bone disappear into the potting soil. Maite lies down on the floor with her ear next to the plant and listens to the faint gurgling noises as water and tiny, burned pieces of Ángel burrow into the dirt.

