

Home in Biloxi

by Alan Rossi

1.

Her father stuffed years worth of stories into the phone, a sort of begging: how the new dog rode in the golf cart and retrieved lost Pinnacles; how the garage's rent was too expensive; how the doctor gave him new pills and how he had lost weight and customers and golf balls; how his friend's bar was bringing them in; how he hadn't seen her in a long time. Stories repeated as if rehearsed, as if the only ones. She could never tell him no.

2.

She drove to his house on the gulf coast, the ocean at night like flat black stone. The white casino on the shore was like a white casino, huge and bright and plasticky. His house was the same house he had always been in, except now a dog named Pepper jumped behind the fence, barking at her in the driveway. She watched, wonderless. She grabbed her bags. The gulf air hit her face.

3.

He sat on the sofa. She made eggs and French toast for dinner, which is what he asked her to make for dinner. His birthday was in a month. Fifty-five, he said. The last one I saw you at was fifty. She said she remembered. He called her Maybell again. Maria's fine now, she said. They ate in the family room, his hands grease-stained, his clothes smelling of the garage. He drank a beer, took his pills, stopped talking. His eyes dulled away. She went to the kitchen to clean dishes and then listened to him breathe, shift on the sofa, stand and walk. The house was old and creaked, she had forgotten. Small sounds made her jump.

4.

In her old room, she began a numbered list - number one, number two, number three - and practiced reading it to him. Out the window, the gulf wind unwound itself through the trees, and she watched the water and the casino. On weekends, he had taken her

to the beach during the day, the casino at night. She had helped him home. Everyone had seen. Number four, she wrote.

5.

His medication had worn all of him thin. Had they watched Jeopardy? Did they have dinner? Did she know Pepper retrieves golf balls? Oh that's right, he said. I remember now.

6.

On the beach he brought her to a whale skeleton with ribs like arms, reaching from the sand. The whale had been on the news, a whole summer ago, he explained. He told her to take his picture while he sat inside. That's gross, Dad, she said. Hey Maybell, he said, smiling. Look here, this. The gulf wind washed saltwater over their skin. Sand skirted over sand. She thought of her list. I wish you were closer, he said.

7.

She packed her car. He rearranged the bags in the trunk. She watched. There was the gulf, there was the casino, there was the house. Remember the time I told you we would shoot the Easter bunny? he said. She shook her head, remembering they had sat on the roof, waiting. You were six or seven? I let you hold the air-rifle, remember? It had been her twenty-two. You thought you were going to get all his candy? You were so excited and happy? She got in the car. I don't remember, she said.

