

We All Fall Down

by Lauren Becker

Trapped

I hold my breath as long as I can. It is her car. No windows down in winter. In the garage, we push out of the car and breathe. Air so cold it burns our burnt lungs. She goes inside to overflowing ashtrays she doesn't empty.

Hidden

She is my baby girl, born between boys. She thinks I don't see her; it is painful for me to look, to love. Six years old and smaller than my youngest. She clings to her father as I hid from mine. I didn't give her enough skin. The world will always hurt her.

I find her squeezed behind a large mirror stored in her bedroom closet. Asleep, eyes swollen, chewing a knuckle. For her birthday, the girls across the street gave her a necklace and a pair of Hello Kitty underpants. She tried to keep the necklace and leave the underpants. Fran Aldrich yelled at her and took the necklace. I learned this from Fran, when she came over to tell me my daughter has bad manners.

I leave my baby sleeping in the closet. When she wakes, we will have birthday cake and presents. I didn't know she liked necklaces. I will get her one next year.

Gone

The day before I left for college, she came to my room to talk to me about sex. She was chewing nicotine gum. The smell made me sick. She told me to tell her if I met someone special. I nodded

without looking up from packing sheets and towels. The smell of her gum clung to the sheets I put on the bed in my dorm room.

Found

She's been my sister's best friend since high school. More than 10 years. I kissed her last week. She had been drinking. She tensed when I grabbed her ass to pull her closer. I wanted her to not look scared. She left out the back door. I followed, only to the sidewalk. I lit a cigarette and watched her walk away from me.

I called her the next day. She came back. We did quiet things: hiking, reading, backgammon. She moved closer every day. On the fourth, she said she wanted to. I knew to be careful. She exhaled "oh," her mouth a perfect circle.

Safe

He tells me he loves me. He smokes in the car in winter. Outside, he kisses me, protecting my lungs from frigid air.

He doesn't know he was my first. I won't tell. There are things I keep.

