

## FROM 7 HISTORIES: POLIO

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*Karen Brennan*

When disease visited our family, casting its brutal shadow, our days became marked by whispers followed by long nervous silences, as though someone had mentioned the unmentionable and then felt guilty about it. It was infectious. I was ashamed, too.

There was a sick brother, whisked away in a blue blanket. My mother wore a red jacket, my father a tan raincoat; the baby was invisible beneath the blanket. A tableau, they stood by the front door, the door slightly ajar, in the act of leaving in the rain. They stayed there a long time, motionless, posing for my memory of them.

## A MEMOIR

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*Karen Brennan*

My first husband was very handsome. His blond hair had a habit of falling charmingly over one eye. His nose was very straight like the nose of a saint. He wore Brooks Brothers suits which, when he left us to live in the woods, he would drape over tree branches. The truth is I made him leave. He was a stockbroker but that isn't why. On the way home from New Jersey in a snowstorm he drove like a maniac. Crossing the George Washington Bridge, I begged him to slow down or stop so I could drive. So he pulled over and got out of the car. The children were sleeping in the backseat. I climbed into the driver's seat and followed him as he staggered along the side of the George Washington Bridge, bombarded by pellets of snow. Finally, he got in the car and called me a cunt. For years I hung on, though it was like hanging onto a mile-high ledge, frightened and quietly doomed. In the woods, he made little fires and cooked food wrapped in tin foil, which impressed the children.

## LARKS

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*Karen Brennan*

I always thought Lark was a stupid name for a cigarette. They came in a maroon package and boasted innovative charcoal filters that tasted like cheap men's cologne. I never liked them, but I smoked them out of loyalty to my husband who worked for the manufacturer. Thus, Larks were a constant in my life, cartons strewn around our dwelling much like, in a later age, my shoes would be. Cartons opened and unopened, cigarette packages on every surface of our lives along with the burnt and smoldering butts and the ubiquitous green haze in the air of the world.

We were always smoking, in other words. It was as if breathing were impossible without the rancid taste of the Lark. In those days we lived in Puerto Rico and I'd just given birth. I vowed our tiny baby would be ready for anything. I hefted her into the flimsy infant seat of that era and jiggled her on my lap as the prop plane hurtled us to St. Thomas. Cigarette in hand, I breast-fed her everywhere, in the glamorous courtyards of five-star hotels and in the grimy corners of discos. Even in that prop plane, careening in our seats, I brushed the ash from her infant head and we both tugged greedily.

## POET

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*Karen Brennan*

For ten years or so I was unemployed. I'd been a single mother in grad school and spent at least half of that time on public assistance. My caseworker was a tiny woman with curled hair and rosy cheeks, like an impeccably groomed doll. She sat in a big chair, wielding the big directory that contained the names of all possible jobs and their codes. I'd told her I was a poet. Her face knotted with anxiety, she flipped through the slippery pages, carefully examining words with a magnifying glass. She cleared her throat a few times as she read and when at last she slammed the book shut, she looked truly regretful. I'm so sorry, she announced, but it is impossible at this juncture to find you any employment. As if it were her personal failure and not the fault of my stupid profession.

1965

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*Karen Brennan*

*And that's the way it was*, intoned CBS's Walter Cronkite with his big megaphonic voice, his square head bobbing and looming commandingly into our living rooms. Across the screen, night after night, the names of the dead, their ranks and serial numbers.

Cronkite, NBC's young and handsome Peter Jennings, Huntly – Brinkley on Channel 13. And the names of the daily dead. Nov. 17 was the bloodiest day of the war – 155 killed.

In between there were ads for Brylcreem or Pepsodent. Hair and teeth. Remnants.

We all protested, feeling virtuous. When the soldiers came home, we expressed our contempt. We who were privileged and did not serve.

LBJ was uncouth and bombastic. His birdlike wife planted bluebonnets all over the Texas highways.

I was a mother. I marched and protested. I smoked pot and wore flowers in my hair. Barefoot, I carried my infant daughter into the fray, into the lost light of the world.

## COMPULSION

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*Karen Brennan*

The *amazona vitatta* or the Puerto Rican parrot resides in El Yunque forest, a rain forest in the Caribbean National Park. Typically 11 inches in length and weighing about 8 ounces, the parrot is only a bit larger than a parakeet. In coloring it is that livid green typical of all parrots, wild and domestic. They have black dots of eyes surrounded by a ring of white that to me look like a child's first drawing of eyes, simultaneously startled and insane, with a dapper red fringe above a voluptuous bill. Their feathers are so soft that in photographs they look like fur. When Columbus landed in Puerto Rico in the 15th century, he was greeted by millions of these birds, but by 1965, which is when this story takes place, there were only about 60 left in the wild.

We lived in Puerto Rico, my husband and I, and were invited to observe the Puerto Rican parrot with Nathan Leopold, a man newly sprung from a life sentence for the murder of a fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks, the supposedly perfect crime. Leopold served 33 years before he was released for good behavior, whereupon he exiled himself to Puerto Rico where he devoted himself to ornithology. In 1958 he'd published a book called *Checklist of Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*. It was a thrill for my husband to be invited to gawk, not especially at the birds but at the murderer. I wanted nothing to do with either the man or the parrot and stayed at home in my cement shack, gazing at the piles of laundry I didn't feel like washing and reading *Madame Bovary*. Later, with a mixture of fear and pride, my husband reported that Leopold had made a pass at him.

In retrospect, I regret not having taken the opportunity to meet the famous murderer/ornithologist, to have filed away a whiff of his brilliance and madness and demeanor. I do not regret that first reading of *Madame Bovary*, however, which for me had not been a cautionary tale, but a tale of liberation, never mind the consequences.

# TOUCH

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*Karen Brennan*

My father believed — or, to be fair, it seemed to me my father believed — that my worth was wrapped up in having children and, after that, I was more or less useless, better off out of everyone's hair. Perhaps all men of his generation believed that about the women. Divorced women were especially baffling; what were they for?

I had not intended to write about my father, but here he crops up. When he died, I was by his side in the hospital. His hair was a bright beautiful silver and I smoothed it back from his forehead, something I had not dared to do when he was alive. I watched the breath leave his body, the monitors go mute. His hair, so soft, did not change at the moment of his death. Still silver, soft, under my hand for the first and last time.