

The immortal life of henrietta lacks by rebecca skloot

Literature



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The Parallel Silences of Henrietta and Elsie in Rebecca Skloot's The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Enter their Number Class, University or College

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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot describes Henrietta's oldest daughter, Elsie, as like a baby bird in many ways. At birth, she "shot right out," as if eager to fly from her mother, only to learn she could not. She hit her head on the floor in the process, and many guessed this was what "left her mind like an infant's" (Skloot 23). Elsie was left deaf and dumb, only able to produce cawing and chirping noises. She often "waved her hands inches from her face" (Skloot 44), like underdeveloped wings. She never grew from a timid, frightened child and instead lived out the remainder of her fifteen years on earth in Crownsville State Hospital, then known as the Hospital for the Negro Insane. There she slept in the barracks and spent her days huddled in a corner behind a wire fence, making her "birdlike noise" (Skloot 84).

She was a beautiful child, similar to her mother in her feminine and delicate looks (Skloot 44). She had "long brown curls," "wide chestnut eyes," and "that smooth olive Lacks skin" (Skloot 272). After Crownsville, however, her curls became matted and frizzy, her eyes, lips and tongue swelled and bruised from neglect and abuse (Skloot 273). As Henrietta's younger daughter, Deborah, compares photographs of Elsie from childhood and from

Crownsville many years later, the drastic difference in physical appearance strikes a harsh chord. However, what remains the same is the haunting look that permeates from both pictures. Elsie is still the sad, mute baby bird, unable to put into words the pain behind her chestnut eyes, the “fear and sadness that only softened when Henrietta rocked her back and forth” (Skloot 44).

Elsie, despite her inability to speak, was loved deeply by her mother. Henrietta struggled to help her daughter, praying for her to be healed at revival meetings to no avail (Skloot 44-45). As Henrietta's household and responsibilities grew, she could no longer give Elsie the attention she needed, and so sent her away to Crownsville. She would still visit, playing with Elsie's lovely curls, but even Henrietta's cousins noticed she was never the same. They claimed “a bit of Henrietta died” when Elsie went away (Skloot 45). While Henrietta encountered other hardships in her life, her family said none of them affected her as profoundly as Elsie's institutionalization (Skloot 45).

Perhaps, that is why Henrietta dealt so stoically and silently with the news of her own cancer. While it was Skloot and Deborah who later uncovered the atrocities of Crownsville, it seemed Henrietta understood her oldest daughter's unhappiness. The last time Henrietta saw Elsie, Henrietta “seemed relieved, almost desperate” to see that her daughter looked “nice and clean” in Crownsville (Skloot 84). It is as if she saw Elsie as a silent echo of herself. If Elsie could suffer quietly in Crownsville and appear to be okay and healthy, Henrietta would do the same during her cancer. Unfortunately, Henrietta's and Elsie's silences, enforced by a society which marginalized

them both, were taken advantage of, and both they and their bodies were exploited for the benefit of science.

Works Cited

Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lack*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2010.