Reflection on Kristen Iversen’s “Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats”

By Chantal Nguyen
Class of 2013

Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for unveiling the truth of the Holocaust in his memoir, *Night*, Elie Wiesel stated, “I swore never to be silent whenever human beings endure suffering. We must always take sides.”

Humanity must combat silence with advocacy, thereby ensuring that those who make sacrifices do not toil in vain. In Kristen Iversen’s memoir, *Full Body Burden*, Iversen exposes Rocky Flats, a government nuclear facility, and notes that “to speak out or to remain silent is the first and most crucial decision we can make” (344), because “the strongest man in the world is the man who stands most alone” (216). Inspired to speak out, I volunteered at a veterans hospital to not only hear the untold stories of veterans, but to ensure that these stories never be silenced.

One afternoon, a veteran named Penny showed me pictures of her tenure in Vietnam as a nurse for Vietnamese children suffering from Agent Orange. As she flipped through the dust-ridden pictures and reminisced, I soon noticed droplets of water on the tarnished pages. I glanced up and saw tears trickling down Penny’s cheeks as she told me about the innocent children who had died too soon, buried underneath the immortal white sand beaches. She said the “crushing waves and sand blanketed the memories of lives cut too short. Forever.”

She still dreams about those children. And she still wakes up covered in sweat and tears, wishing she could have done something more to save their lives. Penny had never shown anyone her raggedly photo album for more than thirty years, because in the past people had told her to “move on, old vet.” She was silenced and forgotten.
After listening to her story, I told Penny that the beaches did not stifle the memories of these children. By sharing her story with me, she conquered the silence, and she trusted that I would do so as well. Thus, I spoke with a filmmaker who also volunteers at the hospital, and he agreed to work with Penny to make a documentary on the psychological effects of war. By becoming Penny’s voice, I helped preserve the memories of not only the buried children, but all veterans struggling to overcome the brutality of global conflicts on local communities. With the filmmaker’s help, I used my voice to ensure that these veterans did not toil in vain.

Similarly, in Full Body Burden, Iversen recounts situations in which she and her community were silenced. Even with her father’s worsening alcohol addiction, she notes that “nothing is said in front of the children. We know not to talk about our father’s drinking” (16) — an abrasive silence that tears apart familial relationships. Furthermore, workers within Rocky Flats were silenced, as “workers in one area [didn’t] know what other workers [did]. The press [didn’t] know. It’s all under the cloak” (17). Efforts to unveil the truth of Rocky Flats were as practical as “throwing grains of rice in the face of an oncoming locomotive” (32) as the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) repeatedly noted that Rocky Flats presented no critical danger to its surroundings. Amidst reports of high radiation expenditures, “no action is taken” (90) and “silence becomes an easy habit” (110).

Nonetheless, the Arvada community exposed the government’s fallacious claims of safety. Individuals such as Dr. Edward Martell and Dr. Carl Johnson published the truth of Rocky Flat’s lethal radiation levels with scientific evidence. Soon, protestors numbered in the thousands to fight against the government.

Iversen also took action. By writing this memoir and unearthing the secrecy of Rocky Flats, she became a voice for the voiceless and inspired all generations to speak out. She ensured that those who died due to the government’s negligence did not die in vain.

Thus, preserving the memories of those who suffer by speaking out is critical to success for present and future generations. As Elie Wiesel stated, “silence encourages the tormentor, not the tormented. We must interfere” because “one person of integrity can make a difference.” Likewise, Iversen notes that “if one person dies because of Rocky Flats, we can’t let that person die in vain. I want to make sure their kids and their grandkids know that … someone put up a hell of a fight” (281). Humanity must nurture the memories of the oppressed by being voices for the voiceless, because if we remain silent, we dwell in guilt forever.
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Works Cited

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