

TWO ESSAYS

STEVE FELLNER

THE QUARRY

Having failed to pay the rent for three months, my mother, my little brother, and I came home to find an eviction notice on our trailer. The front door was barred. Even when my mother threw her body against the door, it wouldn't budge. It was nine o'clock at night. She had left her purse in the house. We had nowhere to go. My brother started to cry.

"What are we going to do?" I said.

"Let's go skinny-dipping," my mother said.

"What's skinny-dipping?" my brother asked.

"Swimming without any clothes," my mother said.

"But where?" I asked.

"The quarry," she said.

So we went skinny-dipping in the cloudy water of the quarry, despite the rumors that there were dead bodies at the bottom. No one knew it for a fact, but that's what people said. Every year, a couple of people from the trailer park vanished. Other residents of the park liked to think that the people who disappeared never got far. No one wanted to believe that someone had managed to escape the poverty we were still living in.

The night was pitch-black. I thought about corpses lying underneath us. I imagined the dead spirits made restless by our screaming, dodging our kicking feet and splashing arms, wanting to drag us beneath the surface. I hadn't seen my father in a long time. I wondered if my mother wished he was below us, so she could think we were harassing him with our happy shouts and splashing.

"Isn't the water nice?" my mother asked.

"Sure is," I said.

"Do you think there's scary things we can't see?" my brother asked.

"I sure hope so," my mother said. "There'd better be more



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to the world than this trailer park.”

“Do you think Dad’s here?” I said.

“You mean . . . ?” She pointed below.

I nodded.

“No,” she said. “He would have pulled us under by now.”

Somehow my mother managed to get the rent paid. The eviction notice was taken down, the door unbarred. But the quarry remained.

My brother and I always visited the quarry together; it was too scary to go alone. One time my brother commanded me to bring the jar of pennies we had been saving. I had no idea why he wanted me to drag our money along with us, but I shoved the jar in my backpack, and we trekked to the quarry.

We sat at the edge and looked into the water, half expecting to see some ghostly form flitting below us. Then my brother opened up the backpack, took out the jar, and threw an entire handful of pennies into the quarry.

I couldn’t believe it; I wanted to slug him. That was money we had been saving from our allowance, which we received infrequently at best. Those pennies could have provided us with an entire afternoon of entertainment.

But for some reason I didn’t yell at him. I even thought I knew why he’d done it. Perhaps he believed that people from the trailer park really did disappear into the quarry, and this was his way of communicating with them, of reassuring them that we were OK and even had money to spare.

Or perhaps he was taunting them, reminding them that it’s possible to thrive, even in a trailer park. Then, if their spirits were reborn, maybe they wouldn’t give up so easily or allow themselves to be lured into a fatal mistake.

Or maybe the coins were simply a gift, a token the dead

needed to pass through the gates of the underworld. The spirits would catch the coppers and hand them to the river-ghost guardian.

I dug into the jar and threw several handfuls into the water, shouting for the spirits to take our money. We were so loud that the other trailer-park kids ran from their homes to come and watch us. Happily, we threw our treasure into the quarry, expecting nothing in return. The memory of our friends cheering us on lasted for days. ■

CHAMPIONS

After I won the schoolwide spelling bee, I went on to the district level. The final round was between me and a girl who talked like a robot. The two of us stood before a roomful of parents and school principals, who feigned interest in our ability to spell obscure words. The girl’s voice was tinny, and she paused between each letter with a measured, mechanical accuracy. While I sweated nervously, her facial expression was one of steadfast calm. She deserved to beat me, I thought.

My mother, I knew, felt differently. I imagined her running up to the girl after I’d lost and tearing off her face, revealing her as an android.

When the moderator declared my opponent the winner, the girl expressed no joy. Her mother came up on the stage and hugged her tight, but still the girl gave no response. She didn’t even hug her own mother.

(end of excerpt)