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Vernor

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Blat/ender!

(How m)any
Im/ports/
are in t(his)
one line?

The ansluuvr is
how are you?
I'm feeling
just wine.

/I/ntoxi/can't/
beLeave
my pal(llet)s
Don't (b)rush me!

One more dr/ink/
For I (p)ain't
as drunk as
th/I/s can(vas) be.

So CritiSize
and CritisEyes
I'll still(life) down
a jeroboam.

My hab/it
Sure(al)ly is/n't
an Edgar
Allen Poe(m).

—Jordan Quaglia

Psst. DeSez. DeSez, it's me, wake up.

Poor Vernor DeSez rolled over in his head, his consciousness rotating inside the fat-slick lining of his rotund body. Really rolling over would have required a lot of shifting on the tiny cot, just to keep his center of gravity more or less on the center of the bed, where it was least prone to flow slowly to the rhythm of his snoring over the edge and fall with a great thud on the floor. Really rolling over would have indicated that he was already awake, had not fallen asleep, had not fallen asleep in the forty-five minutes since lights out which were worse than all the hours to come before morning, worse because the cabin was still full of insidious whispering that pretended for minutes at a time that it had finally relented to the tide of night.

In his head he rolled away from Petey Perry, whose nasal prattling was the closest thing to friendliness he could hope for on most days. He rolled over and over an acrobatic seven-hundred and twenty degrees in his head, wondering how far away he would be by now if he were really rolling. Out the door, down the dirt path, headed for the soot-filled fire circle. He imagined Petey following him, chattering crazily all the way, scrawny arms full of dry wood blocking his freckled face, matches drooping from the corner of his mouth. Be a pal, Petey, and set me on fire. He wondered if his fat would crackle and gleam like Grandma's Thanksgiving turkey, in the oven on hour three, getting crispy. He wished he had a whole gleaming, fatty turkey now.

Dear Mom,

Thank you for sending me the chocolate chip cookies in the mail. They were wonderful. The chocolate did

not melt like you worried it would. How is Bobo?

Things are great here. I got chosen as cabin chief for the second week in a row. My canoeing partner is a lot better this time. His name is James and he is from Newbuck like Mr. Gleeson.

Lying didn't feel good to Vernor, not like it felt to Petey. "They were this big," he had said, eyes closed, beaming, tiny hands outstretched to receive invisible bosoms. "Like cantaloupes. Big, beautiful cantaloupes..." Vernor blushed just to think of the camp nurse, but Petey had no qualms about narrating in detail the way each heavenly mammary had brushed him while being examined for swimmer's ear. How could Petey talk about her that way? About *any* woman? He wished he could apologize to her for his friend's brash remarks, but as unlikely as she was to ever hear them anyway, the chances were even more remote that Vernor would ever even make eye contact with the nurse, the most beautiful woman at camp, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

I do not have swimmer's ear so you can stop worrying about that also.

This was true. Vernor had, in fact, never had swimmer's ear, though he openly admitted to himself that if he knew how to go about contracting it, he wouldn't waste a minute. Anything, *anything* to avoid the pool.

Show us a belly flop, Vermin!

While the other guys at camp had little more than untimely boners to worry about, Vernor DeSez knew what he was in for. There was very little Vernor didn't know about people, didn't *see*, including himself, sadly. And when he imagined the days and weeks ahead, the taunts and the heat and the loneliness, he rolled. He rolled into the depths of that fire circle to peek out from the solace of its cool, black covers at a world he did not want to face.

What a charming little boy! Such a perceptive young man!

He looked at his white Sunday shoes.

Vernor, can you say thank you? What do we do when we get a compliment?

Thank you.

The buttons of his little Sunday jacket strained around six year-old Vernor's cuddly girth. All children are shy and unprepared to assess such situations with adults. Vernor was certainly shy, and wary of this old bespectacled woman, as any child would be. But more unsettling than that was the growing fear that this particular adult, like the others his mother was increasingly introducing him to at church and the grocery store, was glaring into him with an evil and ignorant curiosity, like a toddler appraising a beetle. This woman did not *know things*. And she thought Vernor was strange.

Sally, you really should have him assessed for the gifted and talented program in Burlington. Now she was taunting his mother. His ears burned. He looked back

down at his little shoes and wondered who had made them.

“Vernor is just socially well-adjusted,” a smiling Mrs. DeSez said, squeezing back and letting go in order to pat his head. Taking charge, letting him know she was there. He gripped the side of her floral dress and looked down the long pew in front of him, now empty. A slender, auburn-haired woman had sat at the far end of it during the service, right in front of them, desperately trying to ignore the fact that her husband would not look at her. Every Sunday, she sang along from the hymnal in the most lovely soft soprano, but today her voice had sounded feeble and choked. Vernor found that he could not even hum along.

Mrs. Mills prattled on while Vernor’s mother listened benevolently, her dark curls bouncing as she nodded. If she had paid any attention to her granddaughter in general, or even just that morning, Mrs. Mills would have known for herself that Angelina became very distressed if she had to sit for very long in the center of the pew. She didn’t want to disturb the sermon so she sat in tears all the way through, squeezing past her oblivious grandmother at the very end to rush outside and gasp for air.

Vernor knew not to explain this to Mrs. Mills. He squeezed his mother’s hand, signaling that he would like to go now.

What a charming little boy.

Now Vernor was a rotund, pimply teenager, a great ruminating whale of a thing



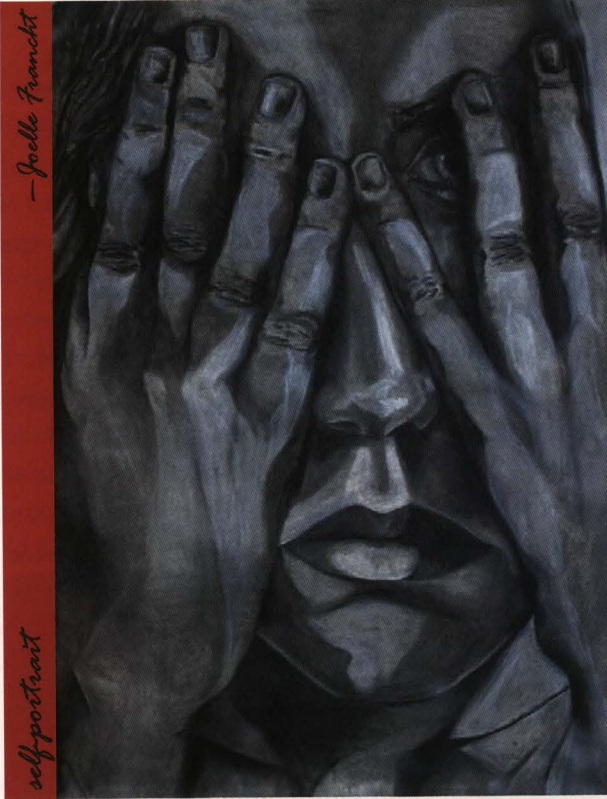
—Joelle Francht

wanting nothing more than time alone with his own thoughts. Even now, that was denied him. Even now, Petey tainted his quiet hours with that voice like rubber sneakers on cement. As if he really needed a counselor to accompany him to the bathroom.

Desez, I gotta GO!

“God—” Vernor cursed into his pillow, feeling sorry immediately. He heaved a great sigh and fumbled for his flashlight beside him. The army green plastic was cool and dewy. It was later than he’d thought.

“All right,” he said, pulling on his sneakers and pausing to rub his eyes. “Go on.”



He followed Petey outside, gently closing the screen door behind him. Petey's feet dragged in the gravel, and onto the worn wooden floors of the bathroom. Tiny moths fluttered crazily around the yellow lights. Vernor watched them as he waited for Petey to come out. The crickets were so loud at camp that there was never true silence, but what a soothing sound, the sound that came over the mountain each night with the darkness and the cool air.

“Hey, DeSez?”

Vernor looked away from the moths. What now? “Yeah?”

The primitive toilet flushed weakly and Petey emerged, scratching his head and inspecting his toes.

“I never felt up the nurse.”

Vernor scratched his head too, feigning dismay. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Petey had the look of a sore loser. He just stood there, hands on his hips, contemplating the pickle he was in. Vernor could hardly stand to watch him lose face that way. Petey was always so proud of his whoppers. Now the poor kid was diving through his own beady brown eyes into a crack in the floorboards, wanting to hide.

Vernor felt himself clap Petey on the shoulder. With some other man's confidence, something he must have borrowed on the way in, he led Petey out, and watched the yellow lights and the moths move away as they gave way to darkness.

“Pfft. You're not gonna tell anybody, right?” Their feet cropped up gravel to the *brreeeee brreeeee* of the crickets and all the sounds of a summer night descended upon them, filling the darkness with the vibrations of a billion of tiny lives and their infinite unknowable ends. Vernor shook his head.

“Not a soul.”

—Emily Smith