

The Messenger

Volume 2007
Issue 1 *The Messenger* 2007

Article 69

2007

self-portrait

Joelle Francht

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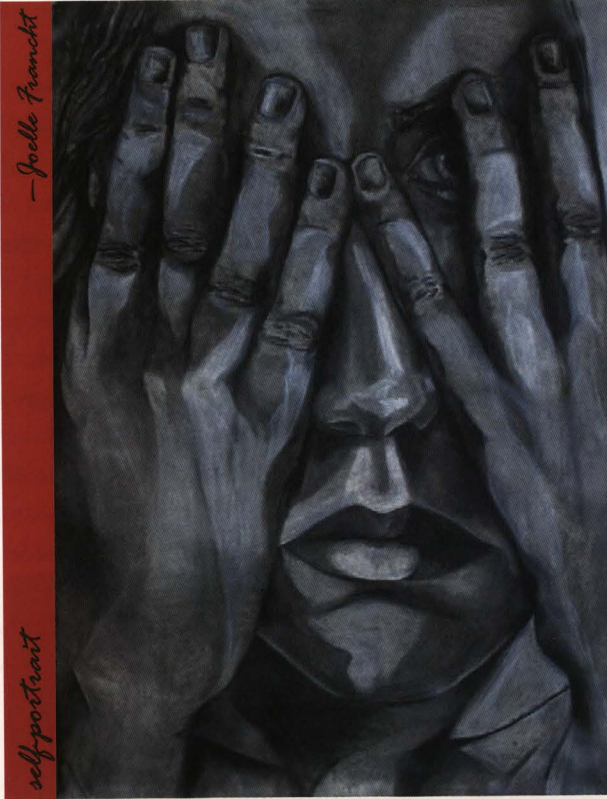


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Recommended Citation

Francht, Joelle (2007) "self-portrait," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2007 : Iss. 1 , Article 69.
Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2007/iss1/69>

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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