

TAKE 2

PENTIMENTO FOR ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Fetishes, Faces, and Flowers of Evil¹

“He wanted to see the devil in us all...
The man who liberated S&M Leather
into international glamor...
The man Jesse Helms hates...
The man whose epic movie-biography
only Ken Russell could re-create...”

*Photographer Mapplethorpe:
The Whitney, the NEA and censorship,
Schwarzenegger, Richard Gere,
Susan Sarandon, Paloma Picasso,
Hockney, Warhol,
Patti Smith, Scavullo,
sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll,
S&M, flowers, black leather, fists,
Allen Ginsberg,
and, once-upon-a-time, me...*

The pre-AIDS past of the 1970s has become a strange country. We lived life differently a dozen years ago. The High Time was in full upswing. Liberation was in the air, and so were we, performing nightly our high-wire sex acts in a circus without nets. If we fell, we fell with splendor in the grass. That carnival, ended now, has no more memory than the remembrance we give it, and we give remembrance here.

In 1977, Robert Mapplethorpe arrived unexpectedly in my life. I was editor of the San Francisco—based international leather magazine, *Drummer*, and Robert was a New York shock-and-fetish photographer on the way up. *Drummer* wanted good photos. Robert, already infamous for his leather S&M portraits, always seeking new models with outrageous

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trips, wanted more specific exposure within the leather community. Our mutual, professional want ignited almost instantly into mutual, personal passion. Movie scripts throw couples together this way. Life imitates art. We became, for over a year, a bicoastal Montague and Capulet.

Robert was a serious artist, disciplined enough to play by night and work by day. His “take” (one of his favorite words) on life pleased me: he was a grownup, obviously gifted with superb talent. That made him appealing. As an editor and a man, I had had enough of gayboy dilettantes who wanted to write but never wrote, who wanted to shoot photographs but spent their cash on coke, not cameras, who wanted to sing but never sang. Sex and drugs drained their discipline for creativity.

Robert Mapplethorpe’s bawdy Baudelaire life was the inspiration of his art. “You live it up to write it down?” he told me. “I expose my sexual kink on film. We both have the Catholic need to confess?” Letters and notes sealed our east-west romance. “Jack, if you’re not free for dinner tomorrow night, I’m going to beat you up. Love, Robert” (July 26, 1979). To Robert, S&M did not mean sadism and masochism so much as sex and magic.

Robert, by the mid-1970s, had become the Bad Boy of the New York art scene. Ironically iconoclastic, he became icon himself as artist and as model. He shot Warhol. Warhol shot him. Whenever I whizzed into Robert’s 24 Bond Street loft, I faced him, hanging over the toilet, looking down, insouciant, from the framed portrait Scavullo had lensed of him. Francesco caught Robert, hands jammed into his leather jeans, Kool cigarette hanging from his mouth, torn T-shirt tight around his speed-lean torso, his Road Warrior hair tousled satyr-like. He confessed in his letters that his main enjoyment in sex was uncovering the devil in his partner. I should have been more careful with this photographer who worked with light and shadow Lucifer, whose name translates as “Archangelic Light-Bearer?” was, in Robert, a glorious angel flying always intensely too close to the edge.

Robert, innocent as any victim, died of AIDS on March 9, 1989, at the pinnacle of his international photographic success. He, with his early S&M work published in *Drummer*, was the archetype of the “cross-over artist” who comes up from the gay subculture, same as Harvey Fierstein and Boy George, to acceptance by their own best creations.

At age sixteen, he made his first trip from Floral Park, Long Island, across the border from Queens, where he was born November 4, 1946, into Manhattan. He attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, sniffing around the edges of photography, making mixed-media collages from

other people's photographs, until, in the early seventies, art historian John McKendry, curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, brought Robert his first camera to take his own photographs. McKendry's wife, Maxime de la Falaise, provided Robert's entree into high society, European and American.

Soon after, at a small gallery opening, a group show of young photographers, including Mapplethorpe, Robert told me his life abruptly changed. A man, admiring one of Robert's photos, turned to him and said, "I'm looking for someone to spoil."

"You've found him," Robert said.

The man was the charming, aristocratic millionaire Sam Wagstaff, the brother of Mrs. Thomas Jefferson IV. Sam was a great patron of the arts, who almost single-handedly, in the seventies, came from self-imposed reclusivity, with Robert in tow, to create the market for the new genre of fine-art photography. Robert became Sam's protégé and, for a time, lover. They were born on the same day, twenty-five years apart.

One splendid, sunny March afternoon in 1978, after Robert and I had disembarked from an SFO-to-JFK flight, we taxied directly to the restaurant at One Fifth, where Robert glided us into a green banquette. Several people nodded and waved. Robert's chiseled face, porcelain skin stretched tight over classic bone structure, broke into his easy grin. "I'm not into celebrities," he once told a *New York Times* reporter.

Nevertheless, celebrities came to his Bond Street loft to sit in the south light of the front room with its silver umbrellas and industrial piping. Everyone from Princess Margaret to Arnold Schwarzenegger wanted to be photographed by the fashionable Bad Boy with the Hasselblad.

"Arnold was cute," Robert said. "He sat with all his clothes on and we talked. He's nice. He's bright. He's straight. The gay bodybuilders I've been with are so 'roided out they're like fucks from outer space. I can't relate to all that mass. It overshadows personality. Arnold's soul is big enough to fill his muscle with his person."

Robert's relationship with bodybuilder Lisa Lyon was the best of muscle-and-photography. Lisa was the first of the new wave of female bodybuilders and Robert promoted her, because she was like him, reversing stereotypes, on the outrageous, androgynous cutting edge. Lisa's aura at supper on San Francisco's Castro, at a clone café appropriately named Without Reservation, was almost a psychic twin to Robert's. She is a beautiful woman of ebullient wit, so full of it that when one studies the non-Mapplethorpe photographs of her posing in *Playboy*, a feeling of

Mapplethorpean sexual satire subtly torpedoed the Playmate image she projects sub rosa on Hefner's pages.

I drank in the atmosphere at the posh One Fifth. Robert lounged comfortably, waiting for Sam. "Did you ever go to Max's Kansas City?" Robert asked. "Did you ever *have* to go to Max's Kansas City? I went to Max's every night for a year. I had to. The people I needed to meet were there. I met them. They introduced me to their friends."

Robert delighted in acting out the tormented existentialist artist role even while toying with the celebrities and the editors of magazines. *Vogue* woke us up one morning—was it Diana Vreeland on the line?—begging Robert to shoot Faye or Fonda or Gere or Travolta or somebody hot they needed fast. I could hear only his side of the conversation, our bodies tucked together, my front to his back, a perfect physical fit, lying slugabed in his twisted sheets on his mattress on the floor.

"Ah, a *principessa*!" Robert said. *Vogue* wanted some princess, part of the stylish Eurotrash invading the New York postmodern club scene. Robert liked climbers. He had a soft spot for princesses and a hard-on for nasty sex.

Life with Robert was the cabaret of Dr. Caligari!

Still waiting excitedly to meet Sam at One Fifth, I realized what brash talent Robert had scandalizing his way into prominence as a "society" photographer, all the while assaulting mainstream conventions. Yesterday, John Paul Getty III; today, the toughest S&M hustler I'd ever hired for the cover of *Drummer*; tomorrow, the three-year-old daughter of Susan Sarandon. His acquired character was hybrid Manhattan society studied out from Times Square porn shops. His driving ambition was to combine the "forbidden" Forty-second Street gut-and-gonad feeling he experienced at sixteen seeing naked men in *Physique Pictorial*, to be the gut assault in his own elegantly erotic photography.

Across the crowded boîte, Sam Wagstaff made his entrance. Obviously in love with Robert, he threaded his way through tables of wannabes, celebrities, and has-beens desperate to be recognized. Robert introduced us fast, taking Sam's hand, pulling back in surprise at the diamond ring Sam had slipped him. "Welcome back," Sam said.

Robert, swear to God, bit the diamond with his teeth. I nearly died. To Robert, who fancied himself devilish, nothing was sacred. Sam laughed and whisked us up, up, and away to his immense all-white penthouse atop One Fifth. His zillionaire digs were sparsely furnished, but what was there smelled of money and good taste. Art of all kinds lay splayed about in careful, careless piles. Robert's interest in photography had kindled Sam's.

Together, they had accumulated the best of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century photography, nearly all of it male nudes shot in the homoerotic covert style of the times.

The past in that present met the future. This planet's first fine art photographers, such as George Platt Lynes, saw the world through the lens for the first time. Sam and Robert bought up a first-rate collection of the earliest art photography. Robert referenced their primordial perspective, but stayed true to his earliest experimental Pratt Polaroids, to create images from his own Genet-icized world: sleazoid S&M, bondage, men encased in full-body black rubber suits, leather masters with slaves in chains in decorator apartments (Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter), men with bodies erotically scarred with razor blades, men drinking through pissing jockstraps (his triptych, *Jim and Tom, Sausalito*, 1977), men with fists up their butts, a man with a satanic tattoo on his forehead who, when I met him, lived in an apartment decorated like a subway car from rubber mats to silver walls and lighting, and who, under the female nom de plume Judith Gould, wrote a sexy best-seller that became a sensational TV mini-series.

"You could do the same," Robert counseled me, "if you'd travel in the right circles."

"I won't suck high-society ass."

"Make them think they're sucking yours."

Robert was as well acquainted with the English and American smart set as he was with the after-hours fuck palaces of male erotic desire. In 1970, he had starred in Sandy Daley's film titled *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced*. He worshiped consensual, ritual, sexual "violence." He gloried in male flesh and advertised for bodybuilder models: his taste running from intense Caucasian perverts to streaming erotic blacks for his *Black Book*. In 1981, wanting my then lover Jim Enger, a championship bodybuilder, to be captured in all his physical glory with Robert's creative glory, I set up a shoot all three found very satisfying. My bodybuilder lover, however, refused to sign a release; so Robert, demonically, cut off his head and turned his torso into a full-color greeting card.

Queens, I tell you, no matter how masculine, are queens!

In 1979, Robert gave me more than one hundred photographs of some of his most blatant work, so I might start paragraph one at the epicenter of his biography: his most personal photography. Some of these photos have yet to see the light of day. Later, in 1983, Robert sent me two original, single prints whose personal value far exceeds the extravagant price offered by galleries, having heard on the grapevine that I have three solo prints, the photocopies, and color proofs Robert gave me as lover,

friend, and biographer. In death as in life, Robert is probably laughing at the cost of my sentiment; but some things, Roberto, have so much personal value they have no price.

One of Robert's photo series, illustrations for an edition of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*—a book whose words were lyrics to Robert's visual music—included one of the many self-portraits Robert shot, this one as a horned devil. My favorite of his self-portraits (1978) displays him in black leather chaps with a bullwhip handle, inserted in his ass, curling scatologically down its full leather length. Robert, as Pan, knew who he was and he was not shy to show it.

"This is," I told him, "your first reincarnation in three thousand years."

"How so?"

"I intuit it," I said. "I get reincarnational readings off some people."

"I'm one of them?"

"You're the most intense of them all."

The world and Robert Mapplethorpe were on no uncertain terms with each other. In this NYC incarnation, or in past goat-footed Dionysian lives, Robert demanded, managed, and delivered what he wanted from life. He lived on an ascending arc of creativity, notoriety, and success. He died with seven books in print: a bibliography of critics and social historians, not the least of which is Susan Sontag; a primo list of more than one hundred international gallery exhibitions, the triumphant epitome of which was the immensely successful showing at the Whitney Museum of American Art, from July 28 to October 23, 1988, which Robert gallantly attended in a wheelchair and an oxygen mask. He is one of a few photographers ever so recognized by that museum.

Robert Mapplethorpe knew how to do *Veni-Vidi-Vici!* He got from life all that he wanted of its quality, if not of its longevity; but then he purposely lived in the romantic tradition of Byron, Shelley, Keats, Janis Joplin, Hendrix, James Dean, and Jim Morrison, whom he most resembled in look and style. There are worse things than dying a success at an early age.

The most horrible photograph I've ever seen of anyone this side of Dachau is Jonathan Becker's photo of an emaciated Robert Mapplethorpe attending the Whitney opening. AIDS is a speed trip of the aging process. Robert looks a million years old in Becker's brilliantly revealing photograph, which, giving a famous face to AIDS, appears with Dominick Dunne's confessional essay, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Proud Finale," in the February 1989 issue of *Vanity Fair*.

I wrote about Robert in my 1978 story that was republished in a 1984 anthology, *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley*, that Robert, Pan, ever-reincarnate, "will, when his next death-passage is appropriate, take his life with the same hands with which he has created and crafted it. He will neatly, stylishly even, finish it." Dominick Dunne's feature interview confirms that prediction right down to the death's-head cane in his benumbed hand that had been so adroit at making love and photos.

Robert's early work, sexually explicit leather images, many of them shot in the fishing-village-with-an-opera, San Francisco, shocked the New York art world in the seventies; but what succeeds better than shock? His reputation spread fast beyond the Manhattan novelty of a new talent in SoHo. The Bad Boy had tuxedo elegance and leather attitude. His devilish smile charmed the proverbial apples from the trees of patrons, grants boards, and gallery mavens. At \$2,000 a shoot, the right people sat in Robert's studio. The right runs of platinum prints and lithographs, dispensed in wallet-whetting limited editions, found their way into the right galleries, the right magazines, the right addresses.

Robert was a shooting star, a lone rider, a nova-bright talent in the fast lane, careening with me, one April night, up the Avenue of the Americas, both of us loaded, but less loaded than the taxi driver who scared us both so much we sat cuddled on the floor of the backseat. Because I was a writer, he wanted me with him to chronicle (as he knew I already was) in my journal what his life, with all its notorious celebrity, was personally, sexually, and aesthetically.

He wanted not another professional critic, but a more intimate biographer. "You do write well," he wrote me on April 20, 1977, "I think we should go fast on the book."

He confessed, late one night, walking hand in hand from his favorite haunt, the Mine Shaft, that, as a starving brat fresh out of Pratt, he and Patti Smith had clerked at Brentano's, pilfering loose change. Patti wisely ended their clerking career. One afternoon at the cash register, another clerk was caught in a bad scene. Robert was shaken by the wild shouting and accusations of his co-worker's close call. "So," Patti said, "quit. We can manage."

They did. Robert's most-photographed model was himself. Next came Patti. She was a poet/singer/artist who in tandem with Robert set Manhattan on its ear. Leaving behind them the notorious Chelsea Hotel, where Robert kicked a hole through the wall dividing their rooms, together they took off: a famous couple, an androgynous Burton and

Taylor. Within a short time, Robert was a staff photographer for Warhol's *Interview* magazine and Patti was a major recording star, the first of the female New Wave punk rockers whose chart-busting albums, like *Horses* and *Easter*, featured chiaroscuro cover shots of Patti by Robert Mapplethorpe. "Patti," Robert said, "deserves to be a legend."

Robert was a legend in this own time. MAPPLETHORPE! His name acquired elitist and popular mystique. Under Sam's guidance and through the astute management of the prestigious Robert Miller Gallery, limited prints of Mapplethorpe photographs zoomed up in price, a sure sign of success in America, where money is the main way of keeping score.

Robert's first exhibit at Miller, in 1978, coupled with a small show of Patti's graphic art, created a mob scene of white ties, pearls, black leather, and New Wave funk. In 1981, a Mapplethorpe print sold for \$2,000; in 1984, \$5,000; in 1987, \$15,000. In 1986, Sam, whom Robert truly loved, died of AIDS, leaving Robert \$5,000,000.

By 1988, Robert's name and face were so famous he posed, in an elegant full-page ad, for Rose's lime juice. What a send-up by a man whose favorite "cocktail" was poppers and MDA! His photographs graced the covers of dozens of magazines. In January 1988, amid rumors of terminal illness, *American Photographer* featured a Mapplethorpe cover photo and lead story "Mapplethorpe: The Art of His Wicked, Wicked Ways." *Harper's*, in June 1988, availed itself of his excellent photos of blacks in Shelby Steele's lead essay, "I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent: Race and Power in an Era of Shame."

One afternoon, he sat me down in his Bond Street loft. The sun slanted through the tall industrial windows and hurt my eyes. We had kept each other up for days.

"You okay?" He unscrewed the legs of his tripod.

"Yeah."

"Come on, Jack, you're lying."

"How embarrassed do you want me?" We had done everything in bed, but with his unfolding his equipment, I shied away and he noticed. The sonuvabitch always had to press the tender nerve.

"Why should you be embarrassed?"

"I don't know why."

But I knew why. Robert's eye was true. His camera eye—his all-seeing Third Eye—was truer. I finally understood why Native Americans feared the soul-revealing, soul-stealing devil lens. We both played at being cynics abroad in the world. Maybe he wasn't playing. Maybe I was only California attitude. Maybe he was Manhattan real.

So I sat, the West Coast writer stuck in front of the East Coast photographer's camera: like a "punk's viktim" about to be X-rayed like sushi at Hiroshima Ground Zero. His sight and insight cut through bullshit. In conversations, we threw snide asides to one another. His honey-green eyes worked overtime.

I remembered the first night we ever made love, his tongue licked repeatedly across my eyeball. That was a probing first. No one had ever so directly fucked my vision. Sitting in his sunny studio, I feared his eye, *malocchio*, his evil eye, his wonderful eye that through the Third Eye of his lens might see me suddenly different, might pierce through my appearance to my reality.

I had seen others whose faces he had photographed. In real life, they seemed so different from the reality he froze into a single frame. I did not want to be victim of a single shot—not JFK in a frozen Zapruder 8-mm frame. I wanted to be Mapplethorpean-Mephistophelian transformed, if not into Schwarzenegger, then at least into the persona of a cult writer of black-leather things going bump in the night. And so my fear of his camera was primitive. He was a sorcerer. I felt in bondage to a process that tries to capture a whole person in a single frame. Yet, I wanted to give the devil his due. I wanted him to have his way with my face. Appearing nightly for two shows in his sexually shocking bed was not enough. Pillow talk was not enough. My own aesthetic required a Mapplethorpe Ultra-Fuck. I wanted what he wanted: to be the subject of his art so I could write biographically for him what it felt like to be inside his art. Yet, for all my personal trust in him, making exotic U-turns under the sheets, I feared he might professionally expose the face I think I hid from the world.

In fact, he shot me effortlessly and quickly. He sealed the rolls of film and called in his assistant—the sorcerer's apprentice—working in the darkroom in the middle of his loft.

"The contact proofs will be ready tomorrow" he said. He hugged me.

I made us instant coffee in his small, jumbled kitchen. Under a silk-screened Warhol of Jackie Kennedy veiled in multiple-image mourning, an ashtray broke from smolder to blaze on the table littered with Con Edison receipts and please-please-please letters from galleries. Robert brushed the small fire to the floor and stomped the flames with his black pointy-toed snakeskin cowboy boots. Minor disasters stalked us: that insane Saturday-night kamikaze ride in the taxi up the Avenue of the Americas; a young gay man shot in the shin, before our eyes, by a mugger in the lobby

of 2 Charlton; a naked man falling headfirst out of a piss-filled bathtub to the concrete floor of the Mine Shaft.

Robert laughed. "You're paranoid," he said.

"Signs and omens are everywhere."

"I read that homosexuality can cause paranoia."

"Homosexuals have reason to be paranoid," I replied. I thought of our friend and model, Larry Hunt, whom he had photographed sitting on a couch, feet and legs laced up tight to the knees in leather boots. Larry had disappeared from an LA leather bar; all that was found of him was his lower jaw and teeth in Griffith Park.

I remember Robert lowered his eyes. His mouth grew tighter. Robert resented resistance. Robert loved congenial compliance.

Shit happens, same as magic.

Wordlessly.

We walked to Jack McNenny's flower shop, Gifts of Nature, at Sixth and Houston. Robert was as famous for his genitalic flower photographs, especially calla lilies, as he was for his phallic fetish pictures, such as *Mr. 101/2* and *Man in Polyester Suit*, wherein a King Kong black penis droops for days from the unzipped fly. Jack McNenny—the sweetest man, the talented floral designer with the drop-dead breath of an outhouse—always saved Robert his filthiest jockstraps and his best blooms for Robert's Baudelairean flowers-of-evil still lifes.

At Jack's shop, standing among the pure, white callas, Robert suddenly, intuitively, knew I did not want to go to bed with him. Not that night. Not anymore.

He wanted to know why.

I didn't know why.

I think now it was because he had photographed me and I was afraid the devil had shot my less-than-lily-white soul, gaining power through some weird kind of photo-voodoo.

Robert was pissed, but in control. I wanted some neutral time together to sort things out. He needed time to work his seduction. He suggested supper at Duff's on Christopher Street. We lingered long. He plied beautifully subtle ways to untangle my mood. For some sexual-aesthetic reason, he wanted me, not in any way forever, just for that night of the afternoon he had shot me.

"There's been a madness on us all for some time," I said.

"You're afraid to go as far into nasty sex as I want to take you."

The hanging green glass lampshades in Duff's lit pools of light over separate tables.

"You want to be dirty." He spun his web.

"Let's pay the check."

At the door, the cold spring night chilled straight through our leather jackets. Robert headed out onto the crowded midnight sidewalk. A hundred guys cruised up and down Christopher from Ty's Bar to Boots-and-Saddles. Knowing full well we were headed toward disaster, I followed his fast pace up to Sheridan Square. The showdown was coming right on cue. We stood a long time in absolute silence, stoned on grass, still points in a rushing kaleidoscope of lights and traffic.

Finally, Robert said, "It's stupid."

"Everything is."

"It's stupid." He wasn't even holding one of his usual Kools to punctuate his gesture. "I'm not in love with you."

"I never thought you were."

"But when two intelligent people make excellent love, if they don't do it when they can, it's stupid."

"That's it?"

"That's that."

This sexual short circuit was about the fuck of intellect? He despised me, serpentinely, for refusing to eat the shit from his Eden's Big Apple Tree of Knowledge.

He hailed a taxi. No hands on each other's knees now Where was that curious dyke photographer, Nita? Earlier that day, she had shot us together when she discovered us sitting in Stompers Gallery and Boot Shop. She was doing a book on gay couples, and she liked the way our arms and legs twined so well around each other. We gave her the poses she wanted.

She was right. Our bodies were a perfect fit. Our heads were another matter.

I ordered the cab to go to the Mine Shaft.

"You need fresh meat;" the devil said.

When the cab stopped, I pushed some bucks between Robert's clenched fist and his leather-chapped thigh. I turned full face to his, and the perfect rhythm of my words spilled out: "What you said you're not, I think I partly am." I meant "in love." I climbed out, closed the door, and walked off without looking back.

Two mornings later, on the Sunday after Easter, repentant, lying with Robert in his loft, I felt his arm wrap around my neck.

"What I said the other night," he whispered, "I didn't mean."

I kissed his long artist's fingers. I said nothing. I didn't need to.

"I wanted to get really crazy. I wanted to go so far with you. Get so nasty."

"This is my farewell tour to New York:" I said. "I'm joining a monastery. This is it for sex. I'm tired of life in the fast lane."

"Yeah. Sure." He pulled from his leather jeans pocket one of those little plastic MDA bags he was always dipping his finger into and shoving up my nose.

"No. I mean it, Robert. I'm tired of fistfuckers and dirty people. I'm tired of everybody always being sick with hepatitis and amebiasis and clap and crabs and you name it. You can glamorize it all you want with your photographs. I can glamorize it with my writing. But our lives are a constant search for new ways to be disgusting."

"You're dirty, Jack. You have a face that could have been drawn by Rex. You have dirty eyes."

"What I may want to do is not what I ought to do," I said. I felt like Eve being offered Eden's apple. "What about my eyes?"

"You've got dark circles."

"I won't after two weeks of rest. I'm not kidding. I'm heading back to California. I'm doing my own 1978 version of being born again. I don't want my face to look like a collapsed cake baked at high altitude."

"Dark circles are what I look for. Interesting people have dark circles."

"Robert Mapplethorpe's famous raccoon effect."

"Why don't you stay through tomorrow night? Warhol's giving an Academy Awards party at Studio Fifty-four."

"Don't tempt me."

"Mario Amaya will be there."

I hesitated. I liked Mario. He was an art critic and a friend. I had felt sorry for him when he had been shot, wounded, along with Warhol, when Valerie Solanas, the founder of SCUM (Society to Cut Up Men), had opened fire on Warhol for, she alleged, taking too much control of her life. Maybe Valerie felt about Andy the way I feared Robert's seductive acquisition of control.

"Hard sex," I said, "leads to hard times." None of us knew then that Gay Liberation would end up in an intensive care unit because of a virus.

That morning, I could have gone his way or mine. Had our night ships been in convoy for so long never to connect again? If so, then I knew that what-was must remain always so dear to my heart and my head. We rarely dared say "love." We had no need. Life is a series of Gatsby's beautiful gestures: a look, a lick across the eye, a touch, a word, sex verging on love—each and all again.

I fled New York, leaving on a jet. “I want, I need, I love, yes, love, with incredible respect, this man, Robert Mapplethorpe,” I wrote at twenty-five thousand feet in my journal, “even though we may never really be together again.”

When Robert sent me a package with a print of his photo of me, or perhaps not-me, or, more, what I was then, I hesitated. I wanted to see what this magnificent visionary photographer had found in me. I had to see if I looked dirty: not from the inside out—that id I had always known—but from the outside in. I had to know if I had a gay face: the haunted, hunted, distorted, stereotypical kind. I had to find out if my face had become like the Fellini faces in the bars and the baths: a dead giveaway of whatever night hunger it was that made us terminally different from other men. Had Robert exposed my soul? I thought back to the letters he wrote me.

His letters ached with the isolation of the gifted artist for whom life is never intense enough. In his left-handed slant, he wrote on April 20, 1977: “I think you’re right about me needing a psychiatrist. I’m a male nymphomaniac.... Just can’t get sex out of my head. I’m never satisfied. It will drive me mad. But otherwise, life doesn’t seem worth it. I’m probably going to have to find one person somehow that can keep me in. Otherwise my energy will just pick up and leave.”

On May 21, 1978, he wrote: “It’s midnight...I almost forgot to tell you. I let some creep stick his hand up my ass. I’ve been fisted—even came—but I think I prefer being the giver. I don’t seem to have any great desire for it to happen again. In fact, I can’t help but to give preferential treatment to the feeding process. I want to see the devil in us all. That’s my real turn on. The MDA is coming on stronger. I have to take a dump but I’ll save it. I’m sure somebody out there is hungry. It’s time to get myself together, pack my skin in leather. The package is always important. Goodnight for now I feel the pull to the West Side. The night is getting older. Love, Robert.”

September 12, 1979: “The ‘punk’ leather boy from SF is getting more and more on my nerves. I hate naive people. He just left wearing his motorcycle jacket. I feel as though he shouldn’t be allowed to wear it as he just doesn’t have a sophisticated sense of sex. I hate happy naive people. I guess I believe in total dictatorship with someone who thinks exactly like I do in charge. How’s that for ego? ...I took pictures of Nick in color last week for a second possible *[Drummer]* cover.... I met that publisher from *Drummer* a couple of times in the bar. Nothing much else to report. Blood is in the air. Love, Robert.”

As he progressed into his *Mandingo* period of shooting glorious black men, he wrote: "I'm still somewhat into Niggers. [He used the word mostly with affection.] I even have a button that spells it out that I wear to the bars. It seems to attract the dirty jiggers. Sex Sex Sex Sex—that's all I think of. Let me out of this place. It's driving me crazy."

On April 10, 1978, on Hotel Boulderado letterhead, Robert, bored in Colorado, wrote: "Dear Jack—I just arrived here from New York. The London *Times* sent me to Boulder to take a picture of Allen Ginsberg. It sounds good, but I would prefer to be under the sheets in New York or even better in San Francisco. It makes me crazy when I travel, especially this sort of trip which is for less than 24 hours.... Thanks to you and your friends I've been spoiled. I haven't really been satisfied since I left San Francisco. I still miss you, Jack. I regret we never got into anything more while you were in New York.....

"It's 10 P.M. I'm in bed already. I checked out the 3 bars near the hotel and nothing was happening on a Monday night in Boulder—at least I saw nothing. Besides, life has exhausted me.

"Ginsberg was a Jewish drag. He made me sit through his lecture on William Blake which was OK except that it reminded me of when I was in school as I had to make a great effort not to close my eyes and fall asleep.

"Then he complained about the *Times* spending the money to send a photographer out here as he's had so many pictures taken already."

(Ginsberg didn't seem to catch on that this wasn't just another motor-driven camera hack; this was to be a portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe.)

"Then he complained about having no time to make an effort. He finally decided to sit in the Lotus position barefoot. I quickly set up my lights which I had to drag out here and took 2 rolls (24) of film. I had wanted to do more than that as I came all the way and I do get nervous about the results.

"Somehow I brought up the subject of S&M and he did say (still in the Lotus position) that he was getting into it. No blood however. Anyhow, by the time I was through, he was apologizing and invited me to meet him later at some Rock 'n Roll club. I said I would, but I won't. His day is up. The time for chanting is over. As far as I'm concerned, it never existed.

"I'm going to turn out the lights and try to muster up enough energy to 'Jack' off. I'm going to think about having my fist up your clean asshole while you.... Love, Robert."

Let the art critics recount the international art world's loss at the death of Robert Mapplethorpe. Let them explicate the wonders of his fourteen different printing processes, of his still-life studies of floral genitalia, marble sculptures, male and female nudes and fetishes and celebrity portraits, of his cool intellectualism smacking of neo-Marxism. Let them reprise his distinctive aesthetic edge in sinister pictures of a watermelon stuck in the middle with a butcher knife. Let them wax jealous over his rich patron who knew art when he saw it and who saw the genius in Robert's art. Let Paloma Picasso and Willem de Kooning and Louise Nevelson and Philip Glass and the punk princess Gloria von Thurn and Taxis be grateful Robert Mapplethorpe ever existed at all.

Let me sit on the ground and tell sad tales of the death of kings. Let me say I hate the portrait Robert shot of me. Let me distance myself from the truth he sucked from my face that is so different from the truth I think of my face. Perhaps he broke the mask. Perhaps Robert, the artist, forced me to look into my soul and change my ways. I wonder, do Richard Gere and Princess Margaret and Arnold Schwarzenegger feel somehow changed? Robert's tongue never licked their eyeball. Robert's lean body never made love to them.

I confess now that in my May 10, 1978, letter I lied to him: "Caro Roberto, ...the portrait you took of me arrived. You're good.... I see the way you slanted me. I should be so kind to you in the slant of my written vision of you. Two pieces are completed in which you figure: the article, short, in *Drummer*, and another piece, barely fictionalized, in *Corporal in Charge*.... Take care, my good friend, I love you with all my head."

Let the critics assess the artist and his art. Leave the private man—what does not belong to Patti and to his lovers—to me. We were too hot not to cool down. As writer and photographer, as men, as fuckbuddies, something special passed between us. Revelation. Lust. Darkness and light. Good and evil. Understanding. Maybe even love.

We were what he said: intelligent people making excellent sex. That's the value of ships passing in the night: reassurance that in the dark seaswells, with Robert gone, his art living on, other talented lights, rising and falling, will certainly loom closer out of the distance, learn from his brilliance, and, for brief passage, prove that none of us, as I learned from him, borne back against the current, is forever alone.

Centuries from now, people will look at Mapplethorpe's photographs, but what will they know of Robert, who has no more memory than the remembrance we give him?

Robert Mapplethorpe was a creature of the night. Take a walk down Greenwich after midnight. Peer in the windows of shops where we browsed for antiques. Robert was an offhand collector. He wrote impulsive, enormous checks for small bronze sculptures of the goat-footed devil. I think he will haunt those Village streets until his next incarnation. I think I am happy to be left with the memory of him and with the evil-smirking cover of *Drummer, Biker for Hire*, which is the best color portrait work he ever shot.

Robert came, saw, conquered. He became one of the premier photographers of the twentieth century. He got what he wanted, leaving me, Patti, and others with sweet memories of a private man who was also an artist from hell. He dared lay bare how vulnerable and strong we brazen homosexuals can be as seers and sayers exposing the truth of the underbelly of the human condition to a blind and deaf society.

Is this the reminiscence you wanted from me, Roberto?

Caro Roberto!