

TAKE 20

RISKING THE MAPPLETHORPE CURSE

Murder, Models, and Heterophobia

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's Eyeball Test of Pornography:
"I know it when I see it."

It's not fair to judge 1970s art by 1990s relative standards.

"FAMED PHOTOGRAPHER'S PORNO PIX FOUND IN DUMPSTER!"

I always knew Robert would come to this. The *National Enquirer* wants him. So does the *Globe*. Warhol promised fifteen minutes of stardom. Robert manages to leverage another month. Patti Smith could write a new song: "Tabloid Fay-yame." Tennessee Williams said, "The *National Enquirer* is the only real literature being written in America."

The media besieged the San Rafael, California, attorney's office after three Mapplethorpe photographs were found, trashed in a Dumpster, and were placed in protective custody. At the time vintage Mapplethorpe sold for \$10,000.

The lucky finder would become the keeper after 120 days of Sodom if no one proved ownership.

Tina Summerlin, then executive director of the Mapplethorpe Foundation, believed, after examining a fax of the photos, that the signature was Robert's.

Andy and Robert would have loved fax. A whole new medium since they died. Fax mutation itself has become art.¹

FABOU PHOTOG ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

1 As early as 1979, Marilyn McCray edited *Electrowork*, a catalog for a groundbreaking exhibition of Xerox art for the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, featuring images by Carioca, Buster Cleveland, Willyum Rowe, et al. Before Warhol, Ansel Adams, Minor White, and others worked with Polaroid Land photography.

Presents
 “Photographs in a Dumpster”
 Concept by Irony
 Sired by Andy Warhol
 From a Wish and a Prayer by Senator Jesse Helms
 San Rafael, Marin County, California
 Engagement Limited by Marin Dumpster Pickup
 Air-Filter Amyl-Nitrite Feather Masks
 by San Francisco Sculptor Edward Parente

The photographs, all signed, are dated 1977, exactly the period when Robert first came to the West Coast. His piss photograph, *Jim, Sausalito, 1977*, was one of many he shot in the Bay Area.

Marin was Robert’s kind of place: conspicuous decadent wealth.

I drove him in my Toyota Landcruiser to the Marin Headlands to look back over the Golden Gate Bridge at the picture-postcard view of San Francisco that is the ultimate Bay Area photo-op cliché.

Robert did not drive. He was a New Yorker. Taxis were his medium even in Los Angeles, where photographer Miles Everett warned him of the expense. He liked being driven. I liked driving him. The faster I drove, the more excited he became as we scouted isolated locations for outdoor shoots where he was not likely to be disturbed.

The abandoned World War II concrete bunkers on the coastal Marin Headlands fed his Leather Ninja fantasy: old concrete, rusted rebar, industrial ladders, steel hooks, romantic ruins of a warrior civilization.

I thought the bunkers, with the loss of Vietnam only two years old, an ideal set for men in military, leather, and prison gear. My lover David Sparrow and I had photographed David Wycoff as a soldier, and supper-club pianist John Trowbridge as a prisoner, for separate *Drummer* covers and spreads. The bunkers are only a stone’s throw from San Quentin.

Robert read the ruins of the fortifications as a West Coast opportunity. Ruins, ancient and modern, are staples of male photography from Von Gloeden on through the genre of male physique magazines sired by the Canadian-born, Venice Beach—based Weider brothers, whose muscle-magazine empire created Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Schwarzenegger’s cross-over rise through pop culture included, almost simultaneously with Mapplethorpe’s 1976 photograph, a shot, seated, very pumped, on the February 1977 cover of the very gay *After Dark* magazine, which was at its zenith. The issue became imminently collectible for the famous frontal nude shot of Schwarzenegger on page 41.

The Marin bunkers inspired Robert. The ruins gave him a chance to show up New York photographer Arthur Tress, who also worked out of the Robert Samuels Gallery.

To Robert Mapplethorpe, Arthur Tress was a competitor.² Tress had created an erotic series of naked men dramatized as sex martyrs, sadomasochistically posed as victims of erotic violence in abandoned industrial ruins of factories and wharves.

Robert was amused by my “Meditations on Tress under Stress” in *Drummer* (fourth anniversary issue, June 1979). My texts were short parables, each erotic mantra matched to a photograph of a Tress perfect moment.

Extrapolating from my published work with Tress, Robert spun plans for me to write erotic meditations for his photographs. He wanted us to do a book together. The working title was *Rimshots: Inside the Fetish Factor*. At that time, he had nothing much published and he was in heat to produce a coffee-table book.

Robert thrived on layering his take in on top of other photographers’ visions. It’s what film directors call a “quote.”

“He’d look at my photographs,” George Dureau said, “devouring them, discussing ways of making my rather romantic approach nasty, searching for the shock value.”

Robert was an incurable eclectic, honing an edge, which was his special gift, on every image he saw.

“I have discovered a shameless piece of visual plagiarism on the part of Mr. Mapplethorpe,” Edward Lucie-Smith faxed on May 17, 1991. “In 1977, at a moment when S&M was almost mainstream fashion in New York, a book, titled *Hard Corps*, was published: text by Michael Grumley; photographs by Ed Gallucci. One or two of the Gallucci pictures are very obvious sources for those of leathermen in rather twee settings which Robert repeated a year or two later. It is very clear he saw the book.”

The specific Gallucci picture shows leather-film porn star Fernando, sitting in full leather in his “twee” apartment in 1977. Robert quoted Gallucci in his 1979 at-home portrait, *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*. Both men wear full leather. Brian, chained, sits in the designer apartment with Lyle standing, holding the chain.

2 Robert once demanded that photographer Peter Hujar be removed from an upcoming exhibit. If not, Mapplethorpe would withdraw. Mapplethorpe won. He thought buyers, instead of buying a Mapplethorpe might buy a Hujar. He did not demand that Lynn Davis, a female photographer in the same show, withdraw. Perhaps he did not regard women as competition. Lynn Davis eventually became a board member of the Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Heeter, like so many others met separately, was a friend to both Robert and me. Fernando, another trick, was last seen as an “atmosphere extra” in William Friedkin’s movie *Cruising*, which used actual leathermen as set decorations. Our smoke-and-mirrors worlds of art and sex were populated by many of the same people.

My interest in leathermen was to find their specific sex trip, play it, and write New Journalism feature articles about it. Robert likewise probed their fetish interests to photograph their posed image.

We were co-conspirators harvesting men.

From San Francisco, I wrote to him in New York:

21 March 1979

Dear Robert,

Licks upon your Opening! As Emerson said to Whitman, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.” As with all “overnight” sensations, you’ve worked long and hard to hang socialites next to sensualists, princesses next to pissers, and flowers next to fetishes. For a satyr who hasn’t had but this current incarnation since about the sixth century B.C., you’ve adapted stunning-well to the technology of putting out-of-focus people and more out-of-focus kinks into energy frames filtered through your lens. You do okay for a kid from across the river....

Enough.

I miss you, and really do, in a special way, love you.

—Jack

“You know what movie you are?” I said to Robert in our constant Movie Game.

“What?”

“A Dandy in Aspic.”

Actually, he found sex difficult unless he posed the tableau. Sex for Robert was a single frame.

It’s a risky career move to adapt and reinterpret living photographers and succeed in creating a fresh tension that makes the reinvention seem so startlingly original that the derivation is forgotten.

Robert dared comparison.

He climbed up on the shoulders of giants to get a better view.

Robert loved risk. In his life. In his art.

Pressing danger, he made his life a series of “perfect” moments.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

Perfect for him.

Robert was the center of his own gravity.

His instincts were as keen as his intellect.

The Marin Headlands presented a challenge this studio photographer could not resist.

Robert, like most sexual warriors, had stories to tell. The militarism of the bunkers set him chattering about his stint in the elite Pershing Rifles reserve unit in college. He told the story with some slightly self-deprecating humor that he had once been rather gung-ho before he came to his senses about the Vietnam War. Personal survival, not politics, motivated his pacifism. He managed to avoid the draft in the sixties until he was too old in 1972. His work, despite a couple of severely aesthetic shots of a tattered flag (*American Flag*, 1977) and a battleship (*The Coral Sea*, 1983), both taken well after the fall of Saigon, contains no real internal evidence of a political consciousness disturbed by war.

Robert never gave up his fascination with guns. His camera truly was his assault weapon. He really was a shooter. He knew how facilely Freudian he was. Because he was homosexual, he shot adoring frigid photographs of some females he would have fucked if he had been heterosexual.

Some women were his trophies.

Because of cultural tensions, homosexuality, naturally diverted from heterosexuality, often creates art.

He liked shooting women.

He liked shooting blacks.

He liked shooting gays.

Robert was a Great White Hunter.

At the Headlands, Robert, a creature of the night, looked up at the Pacific sun as if it were a key flood lamp he could control.

Where better than outdoors in sunny California to shoot forbidden leather, usually seen only at night in sex clubs or in urban aboriginals' dungeon playrooms?

Conventional gay wisdom: The best gay sex is public sex.

Robert risked being caught in the act of shooting leathersex on federal land. The tension of the public act of creation added to the innate sexual tension of forbidden leather.

At his February 1978 exhibit at Norfolk's Chrysler Museum, Robert displayed several Headlands shots. He had returned to the bunkers with his leather model, "Jim," who was a San Francisco opera singer. "Jim" brought along his leather toy box. The photograph, *Jim*, *Sausalito*, 1977,

features the model crouched at an iron ladder, stripped to the waist, defaced, wearing a black leather hood.

"I'm obsessed," Robert told William Ruehlmann, "with coming up with a vision nobody else has had before. My personality is with the portrait as much as the person I'm shooting. It's somehow fifty-fifty. The result is the projection of some kind of sensuality. 'Jim' would be considered perverted in Norfolk, but he's no more perverted than most of the people I know"

This early exhibit also featured some of the very photographs that a dozen years later caused headlines: specifically, naked children. No one in the seventies objected. Robert's exhibition was so successful that the Chrysler Museum director, Mario Amaya, established a permanent gallery for photography, which, until the mid-seventies, had been an orphan among the fine arts.

Never underestimate networking. Orson Welles cautioned: "You can be a live wire, but without connections, you're dead."

Mario Amaya, whom I had known since 1967, long before Robert had invented himself, was a British art critic and intimate of Warhol's Factory. He was the first gallery director to enshrine Mapplethorpe. On June 3, 1968, when feminist Valerie Solanas shot Andy, she also shot Mario in the hip. Mario died of AIDS in London, June 29, 1986.

Robert and I finally met in March 1977.

On February 24, 1978, Thomas Albright reviewed a Weegee/ Mapplethorpe exhibit at the Simon Lowinsky Gallery in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Realism, Romanticism and Leather."

It would be hard to imagine two more sharply opposed groups of pictures, both falling under the broad umbrella of "straight photography," than the displays by Weegee and Robert Mapplethorpe....

Weegee—aka Arthur Felig—was, of course, the celebrated New York news photographer whose starkly immediate, harshly illuminated views of the undersides—more often tough and seamy—of city life were compiled in one of the most memorable photography books of the late 40s, *Naked City*.

In later years, Weegee ventured into more experimental techniques, but the exhibition contains only one of this interesting, if often gimmicky work—the familiar 1960 "Marilyn Monroe," in which the face is distorted to a focal point in a grotesquely twisted pout. The bulk of the collection consists of work dating from throughout the 40s—straightforward, blunt, generally nocturnal scenes, spotted in the violent glare of the old-fashioned flash bulb:

of a bloodied body on a sidewalk in Hell's Kitchen; a "16 Year Old Boy Who Strangled a Four Year Old"; a dowdy frump observing poshly decked out arrivals at a concert....

It is tempting to see Weegee's mordant realism—or what passes for such, for "realism" in photography, as elsewhere, is principally a matter of convention—as an anticipation of Diane Arbus....

Weegee's photographs lack the obsessive feeling of Arbus.... They bear the inimitable stamp of their time and place....

Mapplethorpe is a distinguished collector of photography, specializing in quite respectable work from the 19th century, some of which is now on display at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. His own photography is, one might say, something of a contrast.

Mapplethorpe's primary subject is heavy-leather, hardcore S-M—men in wet suits, bulging crotches, here and there a fully exposed genital (Lowinsky says he edited out some of the heavier imagery, which is scheduled to be shown next month at 80 Langton Street). These images are interspersed with somewhat more neutral ones, such as a nude shot of Patti Smith, and, oddly enough, close-ups of flowers. Given the context, these take on a curious Fleur de Mal quality although one suspects that, seen by themselves, they would scarcely command a second's attention.

In fact, subject matter aside, Mapplethorpe's photography is pedestrianly conventional: rigidly posed, crisply focused, somewhat melodramatically illuminated in the cliché style one might find in the commercial photography of the slick glamor magazine. The message is the message. It is, at any rate, consistent—in contrast to the naturalism of Weegee's work, with nowhere an unfalse note. But then artificiality is of the essence of decadence, which is really just another form of conspicuous consumption.

When author Brett Easton Ellis's editor removed Weegee's name from the controversial 1991 manuscript of *American Psycho*, which was to words that some people judged Mapplethorpe was to images, he left the name of photographer Annie Leibovitz and photographer Cindy Sherman on *American Psycho's* endless yuppie consumer lists. How odd that Ellis, in 1991, did not include Mapplethorpe in his celeb name-dropping novel.

After all, the Mapplethorpe-Helms controversy was everywhere, even on the lips of leggy Mary Hart on *Entertainment Tonight*.

Terrence McNally's 1990 Broadway play, *Lisbon Traviata*, made certain to dress its opera-queen set with a Mapplethorpe calla lily, which oversaw actor Richard (John-Boy Walton) Thomas begging to be fucked before the subsequent murder. Set designer, Philipp Jung, knew the potency of stage action under the photograph, the symbol, the hex sign of the Mapplethorpe Fleur *de mal*.

In June 1994, Paul Rudnick's *The Naked Truth*, perceived as the "Mapplethorpe comedy," opened at the WPA Theater in New York's Chelsea replacing Yoko Ono's musical *New York Rock*. Rudnick, the author of *Jeffrey, I Hate Hamlet*, and of the screenplay for his dead-on movie title, *Addams Family Values*, is this *fin de pop*'s wild Oscar. His loosely Mapplethorpean *The Naked Truth* romped gleefully across an ambitious SoHo photographer, some rich white women, museums, a black penis, censorship of photographs, lesbians, Republicans, sexual identity, and moral crusaders. Rudnick hoisted *Naked* off "Literal Mapplethorpe" into "Legendary Mapplethorpe," slicing with a rapier to a comic cut of an ambitious "Mapplethorpe's" life among the chic and censorious. Rudnick-niks know that Rudnick's alter-ego, his side-quip, Libby Gelman-Waxner, is Rudnick himself, who promises there always comes a day when finally we laugh at everything and everyone who was once so serious.

But in the early unfunny years before the Final Distinguished Robert Mapplethorpe of *Self Portrait*, 1986 could say, "The calla lilies are in bloom," he was just another kid from the Styx.

He had boosted porno, at five cents a photograph and ten cents a "physique" mag, out of Forty-second Street bookstore bins. He had codged drugs, sex, leather, superstars, and ideas from the underground movies of Warhol and Anger. He condensed whole feature-length films into single-frame elegance. His love of multiple images was especially apparent early in his career, 1973, when he photographed, in separate multiples, Patti Smith, Candy Darling (the Warhol superstar who died of cancer in 1974), and himself naked as a sculpted baby draped with a net on black leather sheets.

He loved the fresh iconography of whips, chains, leather, guns, and fists.

Featured with the *Chronicle* Albright review was a Mapplethorpe photograph of leatherman Larry Hunt, seated on a Mission bench, fully clothed, wearing heavy logger boots laced up to the knees, which were spread wide.

The reaction in the San Francisco leather world was immense. Robert was an instant hero for uncloseting the unshown.

The single photograph, *Larry*, NYC, was a mass-media hit.

Robert in one take opened up leather and transformed the personable Larry Hunt into a fifteen-minute media star in a decade in a city where everyone wanted to be a star.

Few leathermen suspected that their obscurity, which had been their deep-night sanctuary, would be turned into chic images that would open their uniquely male world to prying eyes.

Robert found the private doors of New York and San Francisco leather playrooms opened to him. He found it easier to scout the Village and the South of Market bars, to seduce men he found interesting, to explain who he was, what he was doing, and why their cooperation with him was to their advantage.

If art is the perfect marriage of form and matter, then Mapplethorpe's formal medium, the camera, needed the edgy material of men who at night lived the lives of martyrs, saints, and soldiers.

Robert played the avatar, the incarnation, a sadist who was a masochist who was a sadist.

His camera became a literal fetish object as he cast his spell through the camera. His fetish vision became a ritual men sought.

Vested in animal hides, disciplined in sacred and profane rites of torture, blood, fists, and waste, men offered Robert the material he found he needed to make himself immortal.

It was the seventies.

There were enough drugs around to make anything possible.

Mapplethorpe was a welcomed seducer who practiced his wiles. When first in San Francisco, he was so eager for approval that one night, when we were out together, he entered The Ambush Bar, despite my advice not to, in full leather.

"Oh, Jack," he always clucked at me when I knew something he thought he knew better.

He was startled by the "patented" Ambush plaid-shirt-and-work-boot construction look. Immediately, he exited, taxied back, and returned to The Ambush half-gearred-up in a dark blue wool shirt.

So specific were the various gay bars to the male look, by which they distinguished themselves, that a man traveling city to city, bar to bar, had to ask the locals what to wear where. In Los Angeles, Robert was amazed to see men stand in parking lots outside bars, with the trunks of their cars open, changing from one look to another as they changed bars.

"It's very LA," I said.

Robert understood the important semiotics of male codes of dress, and he dressed to kill. He cruised, not for sexual encounters, but for models. He was his own best talent scout, and he hit on everyone I knew or could provide him. He roamed the bars looking for character actors to cast in his ambitious photographs.

Leathersex in the seventies was the last taboo to stomp out of the closet. Its entrance was made grand by Mapplethorpe.

Mainstream homosexuality, represented by the EST-ian *Advocate*, has mostly held leather in low esteem, because mainstream gays confuse the whips and chains of ritual psychodrama with real violence.

Robert, always running against the mainstream, both straight and gay, glamorized leather precisely because of its perceived menace.

Recall the fashion statement the leathered Brando made in *The Wild One*, terrorizing a town where parents ran to lock up their daughters.

Robert's take on leather was they'd better also lock up their sons.

Kenneth Anger's 1964 underground movie, *Scorpio Rising*, Warhol's *Bike Boy*, and the sixties' Hollywood arsenal of biker movies culminating in 1969's culture-shaking *Easy Rider* had turned Robert into a motorsexual homocycle.

Robert was a canny fashion photographer, creating fashion by cruising the streets and bars where fashion happens first.

From the leather bars and the movies, Robert texturized leather peerlessly in his photographs of chaps, vests, gloves, jackets, hoods.

In essence, he sensualized and sexualized the male taste for things male.

He even made straight men look differently at men.

Robert, in the final analysis, spotlighted a primal masculinity contrapuntal to the seventies' emerging feminist consciousness.

That alone was enough to demonize him.

His campy *Self Portrait*, 1985 featured two very self-conscious horns popping devilishly from his head in direct spin on the hair-haloed "Christus" aura of his early seventies self-Polaroids. His infamous *Self Portrait*, 1978, with goatee and whip protruding scatologically from his anus, was his self-anointing as Pan/Satan in one of photography's most twisted and twisting frames.

He was already a long way from doing windows for F.A.O. Schwarz toys.

His new toys were sex toys for big boys.

His take on leather seduced people.

He made viewers rethink the received taste, the taste they had been told was correct but was no longer in the exploding pop culture.

At Studio 54, which opened in spring 1977, fashion, drugs, art, sex, and politics all mixed with leather.

At Amaya's Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, in 1978, leathersex began to look chic, interesting, kinky.

He brought the subtext of risky leather to the glossy surface of his photographs, where the forbidden, the feared, and the truly dangerous were held up for observation by some and worshiped by many.

Robert shocked totems and rocked taboos.

He was the boy at summer camp who at night around the fire told the scariest stories he swore were true.

He played nerve endings like the stabbing, screeching "E! E! E!" violin string on the soundtrack of the shower scene in *Psycho*.

If some straight people and non-leather gays thought his work lurid, he calculated his high-tabloid take to make them seem like philistine rubes.

To leather cognoscenti, Robert's imaging work was not alarming. Quite the opposite.

Robert presented a sanitized version, made perfect, classic, and pretty, of some very heavy-duty unsanitized night games.

San Francisco photographer Greg Day said, "Robert made exciting sex look stuffy and boring."

Day is essentially accurate. Robert's classic approach deletes the sweaty essence of erotic athletics. His leather images are squeaky clean compared with the work of other leather photographers, especially the early seventies gay cinematographers: Wakefield Poole's *Bijou*; Fred Halsted's *Sex Garage* and *L.A. Plays Itself*, which are in the MOMA collection; the Gage Brothers' trilogy, *Kansas City Trucking Company*, *El Paso Wrecking Corp.*, and *L.A. Tool and Die*; and the fisting classic, *Erotic Hands*, that was busted by the Los Angeles Police Department.

In addition, Derek Jarman and Lindsay Kemp's 1976 erotic-religious film, *Sebastiane*—the only movie with dialogue in Latin—exhibited images of Catholic martyrdom, urine, implied scatology, and lusty bodies that enthralled Robert.

Sebastiane, directed by Derek Jarman, whom Robert made his mortal enemy, served as paradigm for Robert that everything that arouses can converge.

Kemp and Jarman, in the seventies, tweaked polymorphous perversity and androgyny on screen and on stage. Kemp's play *Flowers*, backed

by David Bowie in his Ziggy Stardust period, introduced New York to a camp spin on Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* when it opened at the Biltmore Theater, October 7, 1974. Kemp's *Flowers*, a hit in London, frightened New York patrons right out the door of the Biltmore and closed in less than three weeks.³

Robert was twenty years old and rubbing Manhattan shoulders with Kemp, who pontificated that "theater should shock, frighten, and astonish." Kemp, a mad overwrought genius, also staged an androgynous Off-Broadway adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. "*Salome*," he said, between appearances in Ken Russell films *Savage Messiah* and *Wicker Man*, "is my remake of *Sunset Boulevard*."

Kemp was Robert's kind of avant—agent provocateur. They were operatives in the same scene. They wanted art to frighten the horses; anything less was entertainment, safe art.

For all his high-press-coverage excess, Kemp was extremely disciplined, a quality Robert admired. The derivative Kemp, like Mapplethorpe, same as all artists, was "accused of stealing ideas from numerous sources, but..." he maintained, "that he uses such references as songs and character descriptions as mere props to help the audience identify with elements in his own personality" And, Kemp said, "I only steal from the best."

Mapplethorpe listened because Robert had an agenda. He was cleaning up the leather scene for chic consumption.

Barely more provocative than other gay photographers of the seventies, he gained notoriety because he, unlike his confreres, refused to stay in the gay ghetto.

"Fuck them all," he said. "I hate faggots."

He was not a self-hating homosexual. He meant he hated the dead-ending stereotype of the urban gay man driven by politics and living in the gay ghetto. He was ahead of his time.

At the OutWrite Conference for Gay and Lesbian Writers held in San Francisco, April 1991, guest speaker Edward Albee was booed when he told his parochial audience they should break out of the small gay presses and head for major American mainstream publishing houses.

3 Nearly twenty years later, *Genet* (the first biography of Jean Genet who died three years before Mapplethorpe on April 15, 1986) was completed in 1993 by Ed White. White's *Genet* was reviewed by Patti Smith in *Details* magazine, November 1993, which also featured a photograph by Lynn Davis, a board member of the Mapplethorpe Foundation. *Details* in 1990 featured photographs of celebrities shot by Robert's brother, Ed Maxey Mapplethorpe. Such small degrees of separation!

Robert, a dozen years before, had headed out to the American mainstream.

The result was that the gay mainstream never really paid him any attention. He was a twofold traitor to the received image of the sweater-and-camp queenstream: he was leather and he mixed with straight people with money. So the gay press ignored him.

Robert hardly cared. He hated what passed for the gay press. Not until twenty-one months after his death, after a dozen straight publications had put a very newsworthy, Helms-attacked Mapplethorpe on their covers, did the *Advocate*, the most widely circulated national gay news magazine, finally acknowledge him on its cover.

Robert made the cover only because of the staunch insistence of the *Advocate's* progressive editor, Mark Thompson, himself an interviewer of the early Mapplethorpe. Thompson broke the gay ban on Mapplethorpe.

Robert was named the *Advocate* "Man of the Year, 1990," sharing half the cover with "The Woman of the Year."

Despite Thompson's desire to feature Robert's autophotograph with the whip up his buns, the *Advocate* powers insisted on *Self Portrait, 1980*, the "cosmetics ad" autopic of Robert in androgynous drag makeup to reinforce the readership of queens.

Even so, in came the letters objecting to the choice of Mapplethorpe.

The word on the street about him became reactionary. He was even rumored to be a spy on gay liberation for the federal government.

Whispers about "the Mapplethorpe curse" were making the rounds. It made as much sense as "the curse of the *Time* magazine cover," or the curse of getting involved with the Kennedys.

The talk of the Mapplethorpe curse steeped Robert's reputation. Being homosexual in America was dangerous enough.

Being Mapplethorped was almost a masochistic tempting of fate. The folk-rep curse seemed to have some superstitious truth, but the rumor interested Robert only because it made him seem dangerous. He liked any kind of publicity.

He was very aware that in San Francisco, shades of *Cruising*, several murdered leathermen had been last seen in the S&M bars South of Market. For a period in 1978-1979 (coincidentally, the time of Robert's first spending time in San Francisco), a canny murderer cruised the bars where leathermen, surrendering to play S&M games, got themselves into what Tennessee Williams called, in *Night of the Iguana*, "tied up situations."

S&M bondage is based on trust. Judgment of trust can be impaired by lust and drugs. Bodies turned up like photographs in Dumpsters South of Market.

Leather and murder were on the public mind.

Robert's glamorization of aggression and submission was a deliberate mindfuck exploiting the fear. Robert wanted his work to be awesome and his audience awestruck.

Critics and curators could talk of the classic beauty of his flowers and his celebrities. To them, Mapplethorpe, with his inexplicable leathersex period, put a curse on his own career.

In truth, Robert's deliberately designed leathersex photographs made his career.

Robert attracted violence.

I had never seen anyone shot until I was walking with Robert in Manhattan and a young gay man was wounded in a whirlwind of violence in front of 2 Charlton Street.

I had never seen thugs beat up a shopkeeper before that afternoon when Robert and I and Jack McNenny were nearly killed in McNenny's Greenwich Village florist shop.

The once much-banded-about "Mapplethorpe Curse" may be high-concept folklore, but Robert truly was a vortex.

In 1989, a voice on the telephone identifying himself as Dean Kuipers, who said he was a reporter on *Spin* magazine, called to ask about the rumor that Mapplethorpe had a competing photographer murdered.

The new "facts" of the old story unfolded during talks with other people. The gossip came replete with the phone number of a prison warden who could give permission to speak to a convict who had decided to confess that he and two accomplices had been hired by Mapplethorpe to break into a certain unnamed photographer's studio, steal his negatives, and ruin his shows. The photographer interrupted the burglary and was killed, because he accused the burglars of working for that son of a bitch Mapplethorpe.

This story is a pop culture "Urban Folk Tale," like the babysitter who gets stuck to the toilet seat or the lady on a bus with a cockroach in her beehive, like the poodle in the microwave. Each storyteller knows someone who knows someone who was "really there."

Maybe jealousy of the Mapplethorpe money, talent, and success motivated scandalous talk.

As a memoirist, I'd loved the Mapplethorpe Murder story. As a friend, I drop into absolute denial because I gave up hearing confessions

years ago. I can't, don't, and won't deal with any Mapplethorpe-caused death other than his own.

Robert never ever caused violence. Disaster simply followed in his wake. The way he probed at life with his sharp intellect, skinning back what most dare not look at, much less question, made me leave him more than once. To continue with that line of hyper-reasoning could only lead to trouble, and never wanting to argue with him, I deferred to him, or exited.

"You're dirty" he'd say, trying to probe a confession from within the dark confines of my soul.

Over and over.

"You're dirty"

Not even lust is as seductive as reason.

Robert could talk almost anybody into anything.

Very few ever said no to him. But I did. Several times.

Then, when he launched into seductive hyper-reason, even when it meant everything to him, I said no at last.

On the list of names Robert gave out, as he lay dying, I am, besides Patti Smith, the only one from the seventies who is still alive or locatable. We who created the sybaritic seventies all suffer some survivor's guilt. We seek catharsis trying to explain that decade's primal experimentation and innocence to those who missed the party they wrongly blame for causing AIDS.

There are drugs and sex and rock 'n' roll.

There are male bondings more complex than any plot.

But there are no lies.

There is only the truth that is stranger than fiction.

Larry Hunt became victim of the Mapplethorpe karma.

After Larry posed for Robert, he moved to Fallbrook, south of Los Angeles, to live with Steven Darrow in 1980.

Darrow was a blond bodybuilder, a sweet man, much into leather. Photographers and magazine audiences loved his clean-cut American looks.

By the late seventies, he was a star model for svelte-masculine-art photographer Jim French's Colt Studios. Photographer Mikal Bales of Zeus Studios shot fine art studies and heroic-bondage photos of Darrow, who modeled under the leather name Cord Brigs. Both photographers read his good looks as extremely vulnerable. He was often featured in submissive leather bondage. In 1981, Darrow became, in a straight Bay Area physique contest, a triumphant Mr. San Francisco.

Larry Hunt, whom I had photographed on a Satyrs' Motorcycle Run in the summer of 1978, when I was editor of *Drummer*, also favored bondage. Hunt was a famous leather craftsman and photographer of personalities like the doomed Robert Opel and Camille O'Grady.

The union of Darrow and Hunt was the marriage of two stars who very much interested Robert.

By winter 1981-1982, one of the stars was missing.

Larry Hunt had driven off in his Jeep to a leather bar in LA on a Saturday night. Sunday, when he failed to come home, Steven began the search. Larry's Jeep was found undisturbed in the bar parking lot.

The Mapplethorpe model had disappeared.

In pursuit of the story as much as of Steven Darrow, I drove to Fallbrook. I have two attractions. One is for blond bodybuilders. The other is for demimonde detective work.

The escapades of Mapplethorpe friends, models, and patrons reflect very much in their stories the interior story of Robert Mapplethorpe.

I have been keeping journals since I was fourteen.

Robert was interested in my Fallbrook expedition. He was concerned about Larry and he was interested in my chatting up Steven Darrow for a shoot. While Larry was missing, Steven had taken up with popular photographer's model Gunnar Robinson, with whom Robert also wanted me to discuss a Mapplethorpe shoot. He hoped to photograph a series of leather duos with the two blonds.

At Fallbrook, I found Steven alone in his house snuggled away in an old apple orchard. The walls, inside and out, had been stripped for remodeling. Bare wood studs held up the roof. Wrapped Cristo-like, the house, where the walls had been, was swathed in long horizontal sheets of opaque gray plastic. A naked lightbulb dangling from a yellow construction cord was the only light. All the furniture was in place. The situation was mysterious, and proved quite romantic, because, much to Robert's chagrin, Gunnar Robinson had changed his name to Chance Something and disappeared, leaving me alone with Steve.

If there are only twelve people in the world, I was falling through mirrors: name changes, disappearances. "Is it me?" I asked Robert.

"This stuff always happens," he said.

"Not to me, it doesn't," I said.

"To me, it does."

Then he said he thought it was "cute" that Steven and I were alone together "playing Muscle God in Bondage." I think he was being snide that I had broken off with the other bodybuilder champ, Jim Enger, whom

Robert had photographed. Robert felt left out that something sexual had happened between Darrow and me when nothing of his duo-blond leathersex shoot could happen.

Robert always became frustrated and irritable when things he planned did not go his way, as they hadn't with Jim Enger.

In his mind's eye, he had already created the *pas de deux* of Darrow and Robinson. He felt betrayed by them, and by me, for not closing the deal over which I had no control.

"You can't force people to model," I said.

He changed the subject. "What kind of name is *Chance* when your name is already *Gunnar*?" Robert asked.

"I don't think *Gunnar* was a real name either."

Shortly after our brief affairette, Steven called. Someone had found a jawbone in Griffith Park.

It was first and last news of Larry Hunt.

Until, perhaps, the Dumpster photographs surfaced in Marin.

One of them was inscribed, "For Larry," and signed and dated "Robert Mapplethorpe, 1977."

Could it be the missing clue in Larry Hunt's unsolved murder? How many Larrys in the Bay Area did Robert know in 1977?

Robert ultimately disliked the California bar talk of the "Mapplethorpe Curse," because to him, those quips represented the curse of the queening of the gay mainstream who would not accept his leather portrayals.

He was not alone.

Director William Friedkin, hot off the gay comedy *The Boys in the Band*, and *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*, was at this same time cursed by queenstream activists who disrupted his New York location filming of *Cruising*. In 1991, the cast and crew of *Basic Instinct*, on location in San Francisco, was besieged similarly. The objection to Friedkin was the same as to Mapplethorpe: mainstream homosexuals, by and large fairly much the sweater set of female-identified homosexual men, feared how straight society might perceive homosexuals after seeing a film about leather and murder.

So much for "in your face" gaystream confrontation of straight society: it's okay for drag queens to flounce down the street in gay pride parades and to wear dresses on TV talk shows, but it's not permitted for leatherstream gays to be the subject of a Hollywood movie. Such bashing of male-identified homosexuals fit in perfectly with the extreme feminist agenda of professional "victims" who need oppressors. The takeover of the

once gay-male publishing industry by lesbians and that most moronic of oxymorons, feminist gay men, set out to brainwash queen-streamers.

Urban queers exhibit a heterophobia equal to redneck fundamentalist homophobia.

The urban queenstream has, so demonized anything male and straight that queens have become, despite their sexual preference for men, self-hating men.

The curse became censorship.

Friedkin capitulated. A little.

More than Mapplethorpe ever did.

Cruising was completed, and, despite the “politically correct” changes, gave the best “cinema vérité” take on the real seventies leather subculture of masculine-identified men ever seen in a commercial Hollywood film.

Anyone wanting to know the texture of all-male leather nightlife in the seventies will witness in *Cruising* the pop-sex world that Mapplethorpe cleaned up for museum consumption.

Available on video, the film can be scanned slowly, the VCR put on PAUSE, and surviving denizens of that wonderfully decadent decade can recognize the faces of once-familiar friends and famous “Sex Stars of the NY Night” whom Friedkin hired as atmosphere extras.

Cruising is a virtual documentary of a night in the life of Robert Mapplethorpe.

Gay critics generally trashed *Cruising*. But most gay critics lack credentials as critics. Many are opinionists who often abuse the occasion of their review to spout their own agenda. Amazingly, Robert, alive, never received a really bad review from straight critics.

The gays avoided comment.

“I’m beyond them,” Robert said.

“Of course, you are,” Robert Opel said. “Critics in the gay press are lucky if they’ve finished high school. They’re desperate to break into publishing. They’re young. All they know is that if they trash cleverly, they’ll get published.”

Robert, now the wealthy artist, raised the ire of underpaid publishers and writers. The average gay reviewer gets paid from \$15 to \$30 per article, if that, and may be published regularly if he’s bitchy enough, and politically correct enough for (a) the Separatist Lesbian Publisher, or (b) the Marxist-Feminist-Queen Male Publisher.

Gay reviewing is, perhaps, no more corrupt than straight.

If reviews are good, chances are friends are reviewing friends as in the notorious mutual masturbation of that Manhattan clique called “The

Violet Quill.” The whole process of reviewing art in the gay and lesbian press is, almost without exception, invalid on grounds of aesthetic incompetence and lack of critical training. The consequent hurt to reviewed artists, straight and gay, is enormous.

Robert protected himself with his “Fuck ’em” attitude.

He wished gay publishing had been otherwise, because coverage might have meant more sales.

The gay press was the primary cause in Robert’s exiting the gay ghetto as fast as he could.

“Actually,” Robert asked, “what is it about me?”

“It’s not about you,” I said.

“Then what’s it about?”

“It’s about the heart of darkness.”

“That’s about me,” he said. “I show them pretty images of death, which is the opposite of the youth they idolize.”

I quoted to him a poem written in Berlin in the 1890s. Literally translated, it said, “Just because you take it up the ass doesn’t make you a critic.”

By 1982, the queening of the “politically correct” gay press twisted into censorship as full-blown as AIDS.

Self-appointed gays began to censor gay art.

As mentioned, San Francisco’s Eagle Bar, in the remaining seventies spirit of leather psychodrama, hung a Jim Wigler photo exhibit featuring Gunnar Robinson and an unidentified model. Wigler displayed leather images of Gunnar Robinson posed aggressively with gun and knife pointed at a leather-hooded bound victim in the woods.

The San Francisco natives were not pleased.

I called Robert in New York. He was shocked.

He figured censorship of Wigler, a photographer whom Robert respected because he had imitated Robert, could mean gay censorship of Maplethorpe.

After several days of pressure, The Eagle took down the Wigler exhibit. It was an act of gays censoring gays. Robert and I talked cross-continent long and late. He thought The Eagle was wrong to bow to gay censorship. He was genuinely threatened.

“Why should our kind turn on ourselves?”

Robert, who was not a self-hating, homophobic homosexual, did not understand the weird need to censor alternative-sex images, simply because some strange gay cancer was driving the gay world to new heights of hysteria.

He thought photographs of gay death could be interpreted as gay martyrdom the same way that the Catholic Church depicts gory icon scenes from *The Martyrology* for contemplation of what people suffer for their beliefs and way of being.

His concept was right. His timing was wrong. AIDS deaths had the gay community in a screaming panic.

Denial of death became a mind-set that could not withstand the Mapplethorpe brush-off or the Wigler mindfuck.

Robert thought it unwise to enter the Wigler censorship fray directly. For once, he wanted no attention centered on himself. That's when he asked me to defend him by defending Wigler.

"How?" I asked.

"In print. Write something."

"Why do I have to do all the dirty work?"

"Because you're dirty, Jack, and I love you madly."

Of course, it needed to be done; I wrote the feature, even though, by then, Robert was well into the little series of betrayals that happens when friendship turns to use.

There was AIDS, but there was no specific curse, other than ignorance, on Mapplethorpe.

In America, where education does not include art literacy or even media literacy, all art, even broadcast television, is cursed.

Should all artists immediately admit cause-and-effect responsibility for the world situation and the disintegration of the American family?

Obviously, artists, sexually harassing politicians, pedophilic priests, and incestuous fathers are subverting Christian civilization.

Each and every artist is guilty of the decline and fall of American morals in the new world order.

In the Mapplethorpe seventies, pop art and punk art became performance art.

In San Francisco, an artist husband and his artist wife slapped each other repeatedly before an appreciative audience. How is this different from, or the same as, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

In Rio, a performance artist asked the audience to link arms with him in a darkened room; then he stuck his finger in a light socket.

In Venice, California, Chris Burden, the most famous performance artist of the seventies, earned his MFA by spending a cramped weekend locked naked inside a fifty-cent locker in the LA bus station. Burden also had himself shot in the arm for a museum audience. Just a flesh wound. He also was bolted to the floor of a gallery, neck and wrists and ankles,

next to an exposed electrical cord. Nearby, a bucket of water stood available for any playful art lover who wished to end at least Chris Burden's part in the art movement. Burden finally had himself crucified with nails through the hands to the top of a running Volkswagen parked in a gallery.

This was the art world Mapplethorpe had for peers and competition.

It's not fair to judge 1970s art by 1990s relative standards.

Art, despite the stained-glass school of perverting art into the service of morality, has nothing to do with morality.

Art in its pure state, *ars gratia artis*, is neither moral nor immoral.

Art transcends morality.

Try and explain that to a fundamentalist who thinks art belongs to morality the way the state belongs to the church.

Art is, by essence, simply amoral.

Art has nothing to do with relative moralities as such.

This frees art into universality.

Art stays open-endedly the same in essence, while morality itself is relative, changing from age to age, culture to culture, class to class, of every topic from contraception to abortion to capital punishment.

The richness of art as a concept, despite the impoverishment of even wannabe artists who try to milk it for all its worth, surprisingly always maintains.

No matter how outrageous, controversial, or dangerous.

Art is supposed to be scary.

Otherwise it's entertainment.

In the 1970s a New York artist persuaded two street gangs to hold a rumble inside the Museum of Modern Art. Without warning, the gangs turned on the swell audience and beat and robbed them.

"What started out as a minor piece developed into a major work, an experience that forever altered the consciousness of that audience," said the artist.

No shit!

That's why *West Side Story* is entertainment, not art.

Actually, Mapplethorpe was quite tame by art standards of the seventies.

In the late eighties, his seventies work was caught in the wrong place at the wrong time by the wrong people who were reacting post-AIDS to a pre-AIDS decade of liberation.

Politicians and preachers love to incite the simple villagers with torches to storm the castle where lives "the evil monster," the only man in town with any sense, books, and art.

The Dumpsters, ordered up like tumbrels by the Babbitts/Bryants/Falwells/Helmses/Buchanans/Wildmons et al., will always be waiting, because “Art as a High Concept” excludes people who lack the education or feeling to understand it.

What human beings do not understand scares them in their cause-and-effect cosmogonies.

What scares their sense of status quo order they label as sinful Satan’s work.

What Adam and Eve achieved through biting into the beautiful apple, no one seems to remember, was *knowledge*.

If art is the disobedience of absolutes to create knowledge, then art’s a sin only to those whose interior lives are slavishly surrendered in obedience to an outside authority who can control them because, lacking knowledge, they are stupid.

Aaaaa! Not that secular humanism stuff again!

Only through demagoguery did *art* and *family* become antithetical buzzwords rallying followers as armed, dangerous, and divided as the friends and foes of *Roe v. Wade* (1973).

American illiteracy includes not only the inability to read words, but also the inability to read images: photographs, movies, and video.

—Jack Fritscher, *Television Today*, Claretian Press, Chicago 1972

At this end of the twentieth century, Americans in the United States seem to be a dysfunctional population suffering the high anxiety of denial of everything that has gone wrong in the social contract.

African writer Chinua Achebe was right: Things fall apart.

Visionary artists pique traditional morality.

The nuclear family has gone into meltdown.

Parents run away from home.

Breeders who abandon children expect Big Brother as babysitter to censor music/movies/television/books ad nauseam until even the censor must be censored ad absurdum.

Illiteracy becomes a Pyrrhic victory.

Illiteracy has function as the ultimate censorship.

Those who can’t read words, images, or numbers can’t be influenced by the literate conspiracy of artists.

Rampant illiteracy misreads words, images, numbers, and science. (For example: See fundamentalist Bible studies or most gay or lesbian periodicals.)

Petulant illiteracy trivializes everything to defend its vanity. Has ever a truly literate person accused someone of being “book smart” as if books were bad.

Semantics change. *Liberal* becomes bad. *Conservative* becomes good. *Family* twists to a buzzword to endorse self-serving agenda. Exactly when families no longer exist, the word *family* is ironically co-opted by theme parks and politicians and enters the empty rhetoric of “truth, justice, and the American way”

Patriotism masquerades as nationalism at the very dawning of the Global Village made instantly possible by the rise of CNN and the collapse of Communism, which Lenin predicted.

Artists contributed to that collapse.

Playwright Valclav Havel became first president of post-Communist Czechoslovakia.

In America, art gets little respect.

Too bad Robert Mapplethorpe couldn't have been shooting pictures in the Oval Office in October 1989 when broadcast news showed President Bush staring open-mouthed at his TV set at the surprise fall of the Berlin Wall. Bush was caught in an imperfect moment that Robert could have made perfect.

The Western world changed progressively toward individual freedom while the United States crept out from under the twelve-year Republican regency that petulantly circumscribed freedom of expression.

The 1990 censorship of Mapplethorpe was mere presage of the heavy-duty 1991 censorship of the free press during Operation Desert Storm.

Or *multiculturalism*.

Faster digital information, by video and computer and satellite, allows little time for analysis of the information, which, often as not, is purposeful dis-information.

How does a Mapplethorpe photograph, televised live by satellite for ten seconds, differ from a Mapplethorpe photograph exhibited for a month in a museum?

Race, gender, abortion, sex, death as euthanasia and capital punishment, environmental and educational and health care issues, even art, all torqued up into movements, question both traditional and progressive values with little or no philosophical reflection.

Political campaigns and presidential scandals have become as positive as an AIDS test that the national morality is sick.

Drugs and guns in the classroom are as scary as prayer in the classroom.

Twenty-second news bites terrorize reflective thinking.

Automobiles with car phones, fax, computers, and photocopying machines on board are not complete without an automatic alarm system whose panic button can be pushed during a car jacking.

The concept that a single national language unites a country is a joke as standard English verges on collapse. Bilingual education rarely means French or Italian. Bilingual education simply leads to illiteracy in two languages.

The melting pot has turned into the Tower of Babel.

No wonder American artists have turned outrageous.

Artists cry out against the dehumanization of technology, which they prove is a needless dehumanization by the very way they incorporate new technology into their humanist art.

The Constitution guarantees equal rights, but the demands of the disparate groups are increasingly demands for respect.

The Constitution does not guarantee respect.

Respect must be earned.

Dysfunction rules families, ethnic and cultural and political activist groups.

Denial of dysfunction causes anxiety and stress from living a lie.

The emotional debt is greater than the national deficit.

Call 911!

Maybe art, that act of trying to make order out of chaos, is the only thing left as a healing therapy in the insane asylum of a society mad with dysfunction and denial.

Robert Mapplethorpe grew up and blossomed during the dysfunction that was Vietnam, during the lies of Watergate, finally during the performance-art Reagan presidency that perfected denial of AIDS, the homeless, and the deficit.

Mapplethorpe as artist labored through an age of liars to peel back through strong images his vision and version of social, moral, and aesthetic truth.

He used the traditional metaphors artists have always used: that striking combination of beauty and terror that grabs the guts and won't let go.

Robert was the very model of a modern major artist.

His story is the history of making beautiful art to show the terrifying truth reflecting and refuting dysfunction, denial, and mendacity.

For all his personal ambition, Robert was some kind of Diogenes carrying the lantern of his camera looking for an honest human.

For the sins of his country, its morality and popular culture, Robert Mapplethorpe, for more than fifteen minutes, suffered an all-American crucifixion as old as the Scopes monkey trial and the Salem witch trials.

The curse on Mapplethorpe was that the war of values, the New American Civil War, is a constitutional debate about separation of church and state, as well as a protectionist debate about diversity, about homosexual culture's constitutional integration into heterosexual culture, and about women's equal rights.

If Mapplethorpe hadn't been a rip-roaring queer, there would have been no trial in Cincinnati where homosexuality itself, not photography, was the issue.

His documentary portraits of masculine sex threatened a culture terrified of penetration and penis.

"The Mapplethorpe Curse" is the curse on all artists, intellectuals, visionaries, and shamans in a breeder society obsessing on its seedlings.

Breeders, a subset of otherwise acceptable heterosexuals, curse society with censorship.

When their seed goes bad, breeders, denying their parental responsibility, need to blame the media, the museums, and the Mapplethorpes.

The breeding of brats caused the banning of Mapplethorpe.

Breeders are not only art-threatening.

Breeders' overpopulation is the cause of the worldwide ecological disaster. Procreation causes pollution. But breeders' vanity, racism, patriotism, or religiosity causes them to reproduce themselves needlessly.

When overweight and overwrought actresses go begging in television infomercials for money for starving children who should never have been conceived, it's unutterably High Camp. It may be cruel, heartless, and relatively immoral, but critically, hey, it's weird.

Asking for money for planned-birth education that prevents global suicide-by-overpopulation is not Camp.

Children do require food and prudent protection, but is it necessary to restrict adult freedoms and pleasures to the extent that movie producer Dean Blagg could not show in his 1994 coming-attractions trailer for *Six Degrees of Separation* a brief shot of the naked Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling?

Censorious breeders should not only get a grip, they should be made to get a parenting license before they procreate.

Actually, and this is not facetious, the world should get down on its knees and thank homosexuals and lesbians for not breeding and for inventing sex that is recreational, not procreational, and for making the

world “pretty” by design, music, poetry, all those things that the great homosexual Tennessee Williams’s drag-heroine Blanche du Bois said, “Separate us from the beasts.”

Any memoir of Mapplethorpe, what he did and what happened to him, lacks validity without accompanying memoir of the culture debate that his strange tribe of homosexuals had about the strange tribe of heterosexuals.

Some heterosexuals think homosexuality is strange.

Most homosexuals think heterosexuality is too bizarre for words, but they tolerate it anyway.

Heterophobia remains as rampant as homophobia.

Can these pop culture issues be debated?

Or what?

The alternative is all too often the Ultimate American Review: “Shut the fuck up! Or you’re fuckin’ gonna make me have to fuckin’ shoot you with my motherfuckin’ gun!”