

ART MATTERS

# A Trio of Short Fictions Inspired by Robert Mapplethorpe Photographs

Michael Cunningham, Elif Batuman and Hilton Als respond to some of the artist's most iconic pictures ahead of an exhibition of his work at the Guggenheim.

By Michael Cunningham, Elif Batuman and Hilton Als

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The photographer Robert Mapplethorpe is well known for his nudes, his portrayals of New York's various underground worlds and his friendships with Patti Smith, Grace Jones and the bodybuilder Lisa Lyon, among others. He was also a documentarian of the quieter moments in life — two lovers sharing a simple kiss, a flower shot to resemble the human form — all of which will be on display in “Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now,” a wide-ranging, yearlong show of his work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, beginning Jan. 25, 2019. In his photographs, you learn as much about the artist — whose death, at the age of 42 in 1989, was due to complications from AIDS — as you do his subjects. “The whole point of being an artist or making a statement is to learn about yourself,” he once said. “The photographs, I think, are less important than the life that one is leading.” We asked three writers to create short fictions based on three of his most iconic images.



Robert Mapplethorpe, “Larry and Bobby Kissing,” 1979. Gelatin silver print, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Gift, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Photograph: Kristopher McKay © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. All Rights Reserved

## Larry and Bobby Kissing

By Michael Cunningham

*Inspired by “Larry and Bobby Kissing” (1979), which featured real-life lovers and acquaintances of the photographer.*

IT'S THE KISS. We know that. Don't we know that? It's the kiss that yanks you out of your sleep and into the world of raw light, never mind other confrontations of the body.

Ask Snow White, all dewy and prim in her glass casket, perfect as death itself. Until the prince came along. Ask anyone who's been comatose and then kissed back into the living air.

Did other people notice, back in our story-time days, that the prince kissed a corpse? An attractive corpse. A hot young corpse with lips red as cherries and skin white as etc. But dead, or seemed so.

He'd hardly met her. She was basically a deceased stranger in a casket in the woods. But when he saw her lying there, he didn't even pause. He bent down and kissed her.

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He was a corpse kisser. There's a name for people like that. It can't have been his first time. But it had to have been his first resurrection.

How did he feel when those sable-lashed eyes fluttered open and he knew (he'd have known) she was his to look after now? You can't summon the dead and then just wish them good luck with future endeavors.

And how did she feel when she realized she'd been called back, with everything it implied about the avalanche of living in time, never mind having to die all over again?

Were they glad about it? Was Larry glad the night he kissed me back to life? Was I? I'd been among the dead for so long. Sleep, gym, hustle, dinner, hustle, sleep, repeat.

I never kissed any of them. That was the line I drew. That was what kept me in my body, kept me from getting sucked into their vortexes.

Until Larry kissed me. It hadn't been my idea.

I thought, at first, I wanted to be dead again, to go back to that endless smoky undream, but he kept kissing me, and I kept kissing him, and by now, I don't think he'd let me go back to being dead, even if I asked him to. By now, I don't think I'd want to go back.

That's why I'm in love with him. That's why I'm gladdened. That's why I seem to wish, every now and then, when love gets into me like a fishhook and pulls me, gasping, out of myself — when I start to fear everything that might happen if I abandon me and enter him — that he'd disappear, so I could be dead again.

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Robert Mapplethorpe, "Calla Lily," 1986. Gelatin silver print, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Gift, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Photograph: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. All Rights Reserved

## Zantedeschia Aethiopica

By Elif Batuman

*Inspired by "Calla Lily" (1986). Mapplethorpe photographed flowers and other still lifes more frequently toward the end of his life when, as his lover Jack Fritscher wrote, "he did not like eyes looking back at him through the camera."*

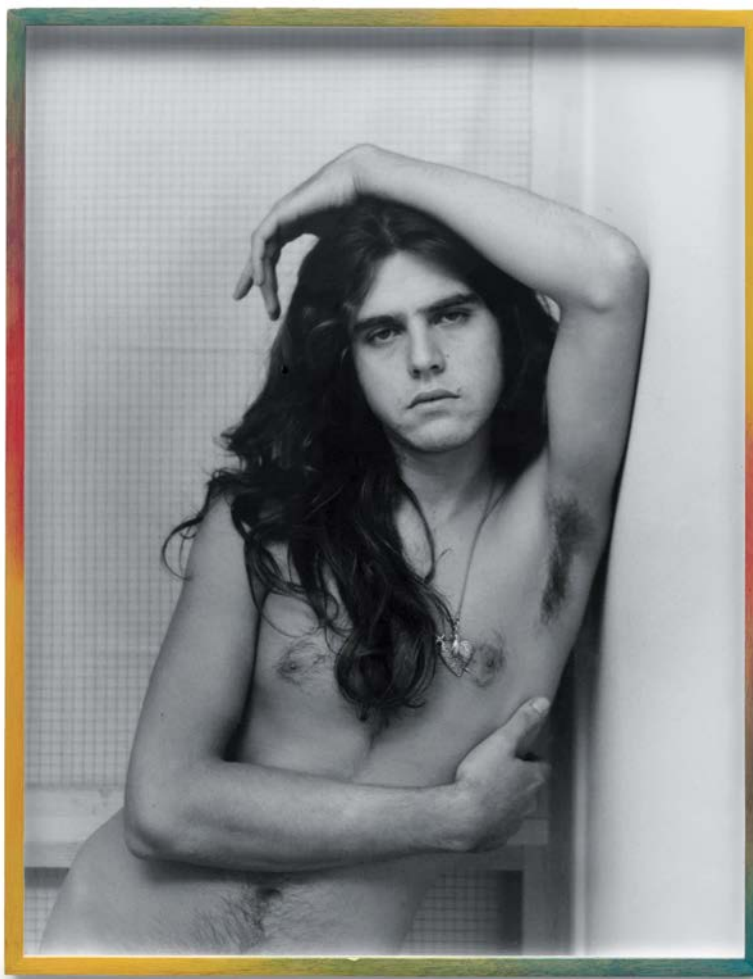
I COME FROM an old rhizomal family in Lesotho. We tended to grow in ditches. We were known as pig lilies. The pigs, who were not prestigious, occasionally ate us to excess. Then we died. Such relationships are not, I believe, uncommon.

Some of us ended up in Europe. The European ditches being incompatible with our needs, we were cultivated in nurseries. Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy, mistook us for callas. That we are not callas emerged in the 19th century. Even today, people mistake us for lilies, when, in fact, we are more closely related to skunk cabbage. However, what is it to say that we are not lilies? Maybe it's the so-called lilies that aren't, in fact, lilies.

I was born in partial shade in a greenhouse in Long Island. We were destined, my generation, almost exclusively, for the flower market on West 28th Street. That's where I came into contact with Dimitri Levas, who procured flowers for Robert Mapplethorpe. It was my second day on 28th Street, and I was contemplating my fate with the combination of curiosity and detachment I have cultivated as assiduously in myself as my bloom has been cultivated by the gardeners in Islip. Almost anything can happen to a two- or three-day-old calla lily. We may be donated to a nursing home or given over as practice material for students of funereal flower arrangements. Levas bought me at full price. He also picked out some of my distant cousins, notable for their prominent and brilliantly yellow spadices.

I was drooping, I was wilting. I saw my life pass before me, and not just my life but the lives and legends of the whole rhizome — the bogs in Lesotho, the ancient Roman portals that we brightened in the solstice. Being looked at with great attention changes you. Being looked at with attention takes time, and time changes all things. The shutter clicks. The shadows elongate. The quality of the air changes. It seems to be made of particles. Art gets longer, time gets shorter. Now it's over. Everyone is in a good mood. I'm gathered up with what feels to me like love and placed in a black plastic bag with my flashy cousins and an orange peel.

There's a story about a rich man in Cape Town who called the most expensive florist in London to supply flowers for his wife's funeral. The florists' boxes arrived and were found to contain the most elaborate arrangements of pig lilies: the kind that could be found in any bog in Cape Town. There is a lesson here, I'm sure, but I never have had a pedagogic temperament.



Robert Mapplethorpe, "Jamie," 1974. Unique piece, gelatin silver print in artist's painted frame, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Gift, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Photograph: Kathryn Carr © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. All Rights Reserved.

## Jamie

By Hilton Als

*Inspired by "Jamie" (1974). Jamie, whose last name is unknown, was likely a part of the downtown world Mapplethorpe documented.*

AT FIRST I THOUGHT I would write you a story about Jamie's mode of being, since he was someone I recognized from Mapplethorpe's picture as a type — the hustler vamp who hangs back and hangs back until he takes you to a new level to love about withholding — and what impressed me about the image was that it was also a portrait of an attitude that was familiar to me growing up in Jamie's Manhattan, a place where a kind of blind self-satisfaction and smugness based on having a very particular, commodifiable beauty brought a certain spiky envy, longing and pride to whatever kids his age — they were teenagers, and would always be teenagers — who competed to hang out with him on those long evenings, winter or summer, when Jamie was walking in the West Village eating a slice before heading uptown, to his "home," someplace where one or another older guy lived and where Jamie crashed, at least for a time. In those apartments, where those older men played Dietrich albums too loud — often they wore too much cologne. Mostly didn't even want sex. They wanted to feel desire, which they didn't equate with reciprocation.

Those guys — they didn't even notice the garlic on Jamie's breath from his West Village slice because of *their* breath, which was sometimes filled with the smell of denture cream, government-job fatigue, recriminations, old hurts, old Broadway-show memories, old ballet-diva memories, scotch, but always they longed to trust people like Jamie — give him a place to rest because they knew they couldn't trust him — and for the lonely that often amounts to a kind of love.

AS I WROTE my story, or tried to, that fiction about Jamie and his times, the words seemed constrained next to Mapplethorpe's picture, a photograph that takes us in many different directions, emotionally speaking, memory speaking, if you knew Manhattan — and I'm assuming Mapplethorpe took the picture in Manhattan — at a moment when Jamie gave R.M. all that hair and 'tude. I couldn't compete with Mapplethorpe's "Jamie." I did and did not know boys like Jamie when I first started hanging out in New York sometime after the picture was taken. I wasn't present, scene-wise, until the late 1970s, but even then there were pretty white boys around, boys whose calling

card was their beauty and their insolence, a sort of at-least-I'm-not-you spiteful arrogance that got them pretty far, or as far as your looks ever get you, which is to say not very long in Manhattan, where there's always someone new. Sometimes, an older man, grateful for the attention, paid for guys like Jamie's attention — evenings, days, sometimes weeks and months of their attention, but something would always derail the younger Jamie guys from their whispered or sometimes not whispered goals while they sipped vodka and orange juice at some bar where they went to relax and show off to their contemporaries, making sure to flash their new gold bracelet as they chatted. Eventually, they'd have to sell that bracelet, though, because everything they projected — coolness, authority, punkness — was built on shale. They had no real talent except a talent for making older guys want them, that's why they had to keep hanging out at places where older tricks gathered, like the Ninth Circle, which reeked of cologne and last chances: They wanted another chance at mentorship and shelter, but how's that supposed to work out when you have no real talent, or shall I say interest, in other people?

THERE'S JAMIE IN his Fiorucci or Sergio Valente jeans, his crotch a promise and a threat. Not many people got beyond the zipper. And as I began to think about him, or, more accurately, began to think about his image, I saw Jamie before he came to town, living with his sister — his only living family member, she raised him after their parents split, or died in a wreck, maybe something like that? — in an apartment somewhere in Queens; Jamie's maybe 15 years old, and love was already something terrible. Sitting next to his sister on her bed that's on the floor — it was the times — Jamie watches as his sister exposes herself to the sweet smelling pile of pink — pink blanket, pink woolen hat — squirming and then crying, not knowing enough to leave well enough alone. Before — before the pink savagery made war on their ears and his sister's body — the brother and sister had sat in what passed as contentment in their small family. In the sitting room off the sister's room, the TV was going and going steadily, like contentment, too. It said terrible things and showed terrible things — boys limping through the last in Vietnam, for instance; Harry Reasoner burying feeling, as the brother and sister recalling how they were going to change the world were now trapped, something they didn't talk about but knew as the baby tried to latch onto Jamie's sister's breast and she winced: Her nipples were beyond sensitive; her milk would come and not come. After that, I tore up pages. I didn't want my story to follow a predictable, "psychological" course of action — Jamie can't love because mother love has taken his sister away from him — but come to think of it, aren't we mostly all predictable when we feel we've been rejected by one being for another?