

I wanted to find a picture that felt singular, and I did. Robert Mapplethorpe's photograph titled *Jack Walls*, 1982 (fig. 1) stood out in his file immediately. Originally I'd found a few of Mapplethorpe's photographs in the *Urination & Defecation* folder; I wonder how many of the good pictures are tucked away in other places, or out on loan. The source of this one is Mapplethorpe's controversial *Black Book*, published by St. Martin's Press in 1986. *The Black Book* is, according to the 2010 Schirmer/Mosel edition's dust jacket, Mapplethorpe's "homage to the black male body" and "one of the most important visual contributions to the discourse on beauty, sensuality and sexuality in photography." I found most of the pictures in the book beautiful but unremarkable as a whole; Mapplethorpe is an adept photographer, and the book forgoes a tighter edit in favor of a gluttony of self-indulgent images.

The criticism of this book is evident in the pictures: the gay, Black male body is cropped and disrupted and fetishized. A significant number of the photographs either showcase the sexual organs of Black men, leaning into racist stereotypes, or highlight the chiseled, idealized bodies, contributing to tropes about the atypical strength of Black men. Some, but not all, images are titled after their subjects, including the one that I found in the collection. I want to focus on the featured image (fig. 1) and the sequence it appears within. (I'm writing about the sequencing within the 2010 Schirmer/Mosel edition; I placed the wrong edition of the book on hold, in the end-of-year chaos. The 2010 edition added "the" to the title.)

There are five photographs in a row of Jack Walls, Mapplethorpe's partner throughout the eighties until the artist's death of AIDS in 1989; the photographs were all made early in the decade and in their courtship. Walls appears first in his Navy uniform after other men in uniform, portraits that feel formal and quite official; he gazes solemnly at the camera, his jacket unbuttoned, brightly and evenly lit. Then we see the back of his head and the cap with its rumpled folds, white against dark skin and small curls at the neck, the ear almost levitating from the body, a soft rounding profile down the ridges of the cheek. Opposite, Walls flexes his bicep in uniform, the image marred in the slightly blurry, very eighties smudged lens way, a film that sits over the image. I pre-



fer Mapplethorpe's pictures with clarity, the way that each stitch is discernible, each woven thread, a small sweat stain on the cap near the temple.

When I turn the page, it's a two-page spread featuring the image I found in the Picture Collection — *Jack Walls*, 1982. Both photographs were taken on a coastal boardwalk with wide planks and the gaps between them, sea grasses and sand dunes beyond the metal railing (further research confirms they were made on a trip to Fire Island). On the left, the vantage point is low, and situated in the middle of the frame are a man's legs, thin and bowing slightly apart, wide shorts, laced-up ankle boots and tall socks, one scrunched down a bit. I find this a tender picture: the legs look strong but childlike in how they tip away from one another. Maybe it's the angle too, how low we are, that it's a child's view of the legs, that the knees are vulnerable, that this feels like a photograph made of a partner and not a subject. The legs are planted firmly, one on each plank, and from here we can see that the boards are slightly warped or crooked; the whole picture is unwieldy.

Opposite this picture is one I find dynamic and graceful, this time containing Walls' whole body in the square. We, the viewer, are behind him, and he spreads his arms wide and grips the top rail-

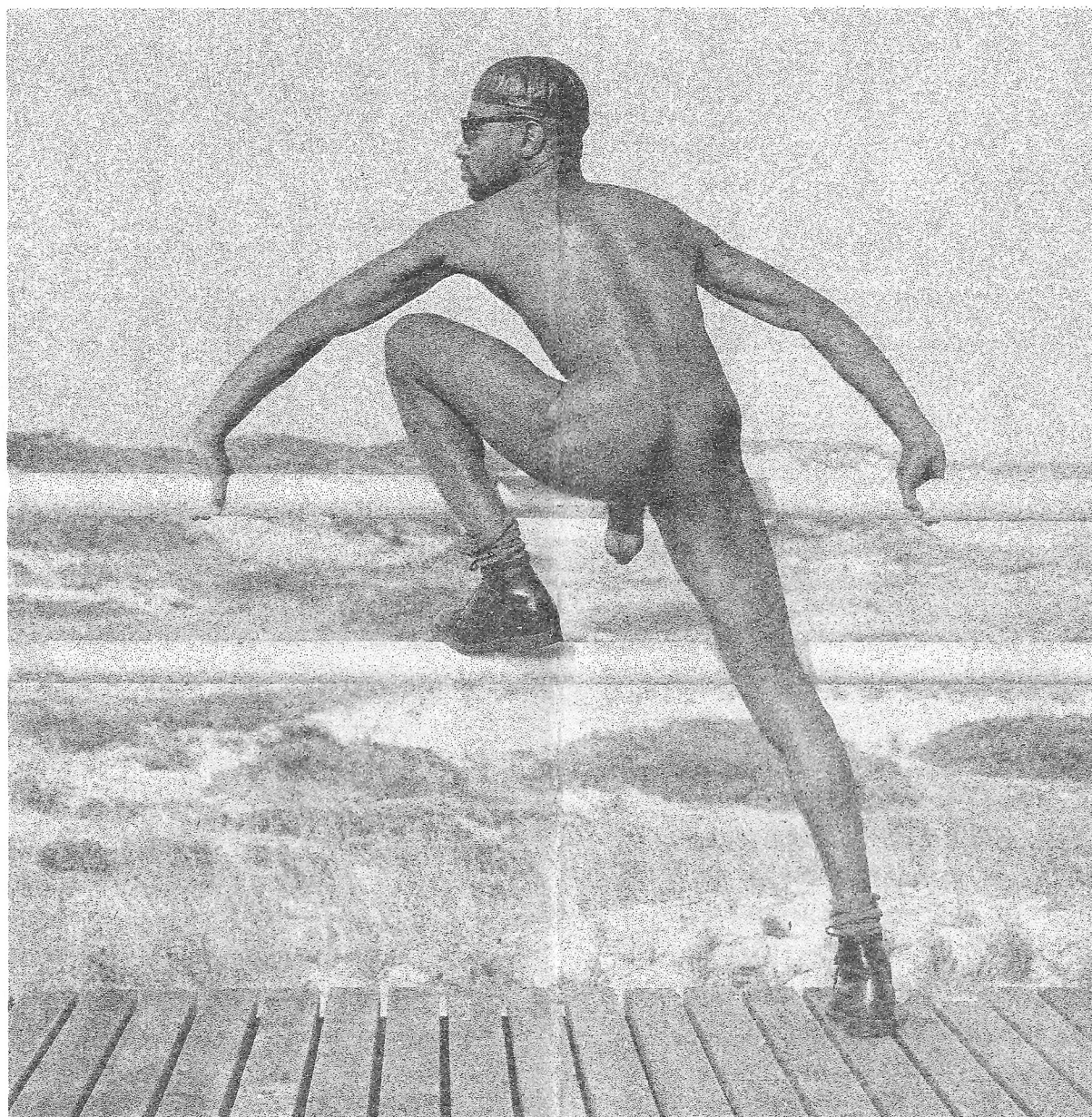


fig. 1. *Jack Walls*, 1982, from Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, foreword by Ntozake Shange, St. Martin's Press, 1986. Photographs copyright 1986 Robert Mapplethorpe. (#22,666)

ing. He is nude but for his boots and socks, now scrunched further, and a leather cap. He wears sunglasses and looks over his shoulder to the left; his left leg is raised, propped up on the second railing and bent, the other foot strongly set on the ground, this leg parallel to the first. There is such ease in this posture, such comfort and

agility, and the sense that Walls may leap off the page. It is an exquisite square, fully realized. The lines of Walls' muscle and veins contribute to this, the divot of his spine, the strength in the ass. I can trace them with my finger, which feels perverse. Following his line of sight, we see the knees under their billowing shorts, the creas-

es where he has sat and the fabric has molded around him. The photograph on the left is a slightly off-kilter composition, cut and cropped so that we can't see the waistband, so that Walls appears a giant among the railings, which gleam in the sun. On the right the shadows are slight — the underside of the musculature, the crease of the bent leg, the buttocks shading most, but not all, of the testicles. Walls has very little contact with the ground, he is strong and weightless in this picture, there is no shadow beneath him, he can simply take off. The image on the left in comparison feels very amateur, very aware of the particular frame of the square and how straight lines may betray it. On the right, the dunes rise above the railing, too — despite the giant-like vantage point on the left, he appears so powerful and self-assured in fig. 1, a different person than the one depicted in uniform. Alone in the collection this photograph stopped me.

I don't know if this book has the same sequence as the original published by St. Martin's in 1986, but I am stopped again when I turn the page to a spread of two truncated images of a faceless Black man. In the first, *Hooded Man*, 1980, a pillowcase covers his face, fashioned to appear like a white hood; his hands touch in a slight caress in front of his chest, his nude body presented in the studio with a gray background nearly the



same tone as his skin and the hood. This tone is what impacts me, the evenness of it, how Mapplethorpe lit this and printed this; it shows how intentional he could be, which makes the excess of images in the book feel lacking in their imprecision, and demeaning in the precise objectification of the Black body. This is a taut image — not a square, trimmed at the sides — with the point of the hood nearly brushing the top edge of the frame, the seam running down the face like a tear, and the tip of the penis hanging just above the bottom of the frame. The subject's body is cross-shaped, evenly lit, deep shadows blooming beneath his hands and his armpits and across the torso. Taut is the word I keep returning to: a tight composition, a tight body again where veins and muscles and the deep pool of the clavicles are seen, are displayed for us to see, and the hood, which is not wrapped tightly enough to emulate facial features, except maybe the tip of a nose. The elbows sharp, the hips tight, a body intentionally being shown to us: a Black man in a makeshift Klan hood.

Opposite this photograph is one of Mapplethorpe's most famous images, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980. What surprises me is its place in the sequence, moving from the clothed military member to the artist's nude partner in the landscape, a brief respite from Mapplethorpe's comfort zone in the studio: turning the page from Walls' self-assurance to the hood and to Mapplethorpe's ode to the Black cock, not the Black male form or the Black man but the sexual organ. The uncircumcised penis hangs out of polyester trousers, a long vein curling down to the tip like the veins of a leaf, the legs slightly spread and hands held as if in motion; the suit is creased and wrinkled, the size of the flaccid penis is immense, a penis with presence on the page, a composition focused on the phallus. The whitest highlight of the image is the shirttail, resting atop the penis like a finger or the folded petal of a flower. From here, we turn to more cock, ass, leg photographs, but this spread is shocking and titillating, which was and remains the point; it serves as a clear distillation of the book as a whole — Mapplethorpe's obsession with race and stereotype, and his utilization of Black men as fetish objects and as subjects for his work. (Elsewhere in the book, he literally placed Black men on pedestals; see plates 36 and 37.) The small series featuring Walls is Mapplethorpe at his compositional best, directly preceding this garish juxtaposition, allowing Walls a modicum of agency as a subject among otherwise cruel pictures: a portrait of Walls himself, instead of merely his sexuality.