

PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES HOW WE PERCEIVE OURSELVES

JIM MOORE

MY WIFE, JOANN VERBURG, HAS BEEN PHOTOGRAPHING ME for twenty-five years. As soon as we became serious about each other it started and though there are long periods where she doesn't photograph me, eventually she wants to work with me again.

Just as her approach to photographing me has changed over the years, my attitude as the model has changed. At first, when we were falling in love, I felt flattered that she wanted to photograph me. No one had ever looked at me with such intensity and for such long periods of time. I've heard her say that photographing me—some of these pictures were quite large heads—allowed her to get used to the idea of a big head waking up next to her each morning; it was a way to get to know me using her medium as a tool.

I suppose that being her model was also a way for me to get to know her as well: because, after all, she was not just observing me, I was observing her. Over time, my response to how it feels to be photographed has ranged widely: sometimes it has bored the hell out of me, other times it has put me in a meditative state (after all, when you're being photographed with a large-format camera and can't move for thirty or forty minutes, it does encourage an inner as well as the outer stillness); most often—and most prosaically—it has put me to sleep. Literally. And this has suited her purposes as a photographer since she has focused on photographing me while I sleep.

I don't know that she would agree with what I am about to say but I believe that one of the reasons she so often photographs me asleep is that she is "practicing" for the day when I will die. As a poet, I believe that the most challenging conversations I have in my work are often with death. I think this is true for a lot of artists, whether writers or artists working in other mediums.

Sometimes JoAnn says, "Art is a wish." What her wish is, as an artist, I can't say for sure, but my wish as a model is that for the period of time I am being photographed I might become someone who is somehow different from the man he usually is. While sometimes a nap is just a nap, occasionally it is more than that, and I wake from it with a calm kind of clarity that visits rarely but is all the more welcome for that.

A number of years ago I wrote a poem that brought together some of my feelings about being photographed so often. As I read it over now, I realize that posing is also a sensual experience. In the kind of work that JoAnn does, it is very much about letting your body relax, open up, be present: life doesn't get any better than that.

You want me lying down and I, too, love the unbuckling,
the slow lowering, alone, onto the old green couch, eyes now
barely open. The camera stands stiffly on its tripod,
a kind of disciple in need of focusing from
someone like you who fusses over sleepers and serves
the world by preserving loss, one image at a time.

At first I track you as you move above my body.
Stretched out near sleep, I am the helpless universe you need,
someone about to lose himself to dreams, to disappear
beyond any purpose or hope a waking world can solve.
Alert and intense, you hover above me.
Meanwhile, I fall asleep. For me, it's just another nap.

This time I'm gone longer than usual. When I wake
you've moved the gladioli behind my pillowed head.
Arms crossed over my chest, I feel refreshed and calm,
as if, waking at my own funeral, I find that death is simple,
not like life at all. I lie still and wait for you to finish.
It's love that lets me trust you with my sleep, arrange my death.

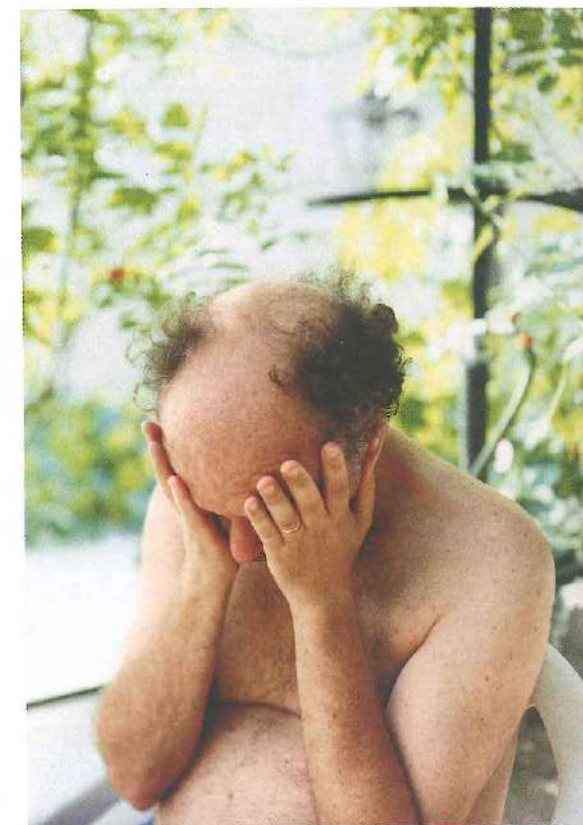
Death brings out the best in me. These portraits help me see the soul
I might have been, set free from useless fears. I see a man
I forgot I knew, someone subsumed by stillness without
regret. I wake to see myself as you do, a calm one
at rest, a little dazed, still posing from his sleep, as if
first comes the letting go of life; and only then, the wakefulness.

(Jim Moore, "The Portrait")

JIM MOORE, poet and educator, is the author of six collections of poetry, including *Invisible Strings* (2011) and *Lightning at Dinner* (2005). His poems have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *American Poetry Review*, the *Nation*, and the *Paris Review*, as well as in many other magazines and anthologies. Moore—a recipient of awards from the Bush Foundation, the LOFT Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the Minnesota State Arts Board—teaches in the MFA program at Hamline University in Saint Paul, Minnesota.



JoAnn Verburg, *Jim and Jody*, 1994



JoAnn Verburg, *Untitled (Green Jim)*, 2008