James Purdy:
Storyteller of the Unhomed Imagination

by Donald Pease

Hyperion, Volume VI, issue 1, March 2011

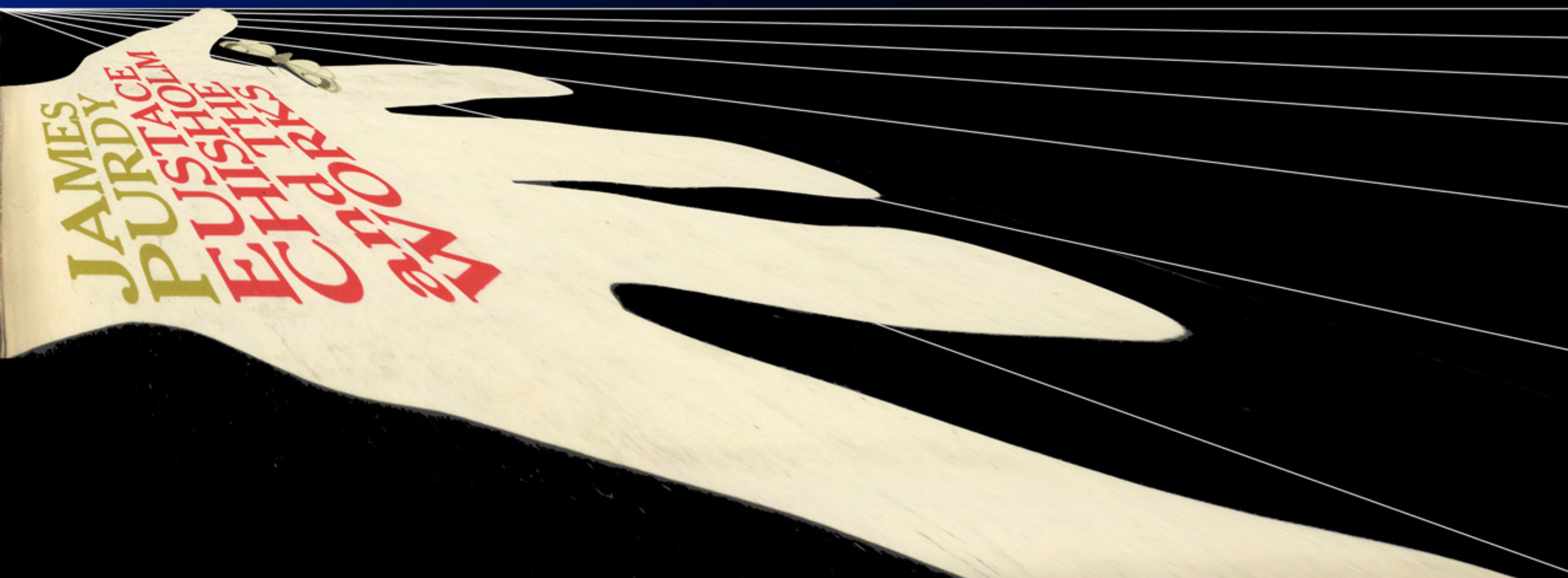
HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

James Purdy

Storyteller of the Unhomed Imagination

by Donald Pease



Throughout the half century of his literary career, James Purdy returned obsessively to the figure of the transient. Exiles, outcasts, renegades, fugitives, displaced and homeless persons, grifters on the lam, criminals on the run, migrants, outlaws, and refugees wander through Purdy's work in search of some kind of shelter. They pass through the social order but without becoming accommodated to its arrangements. Efforts to acculturate them only intensify their feeling of disconnection.

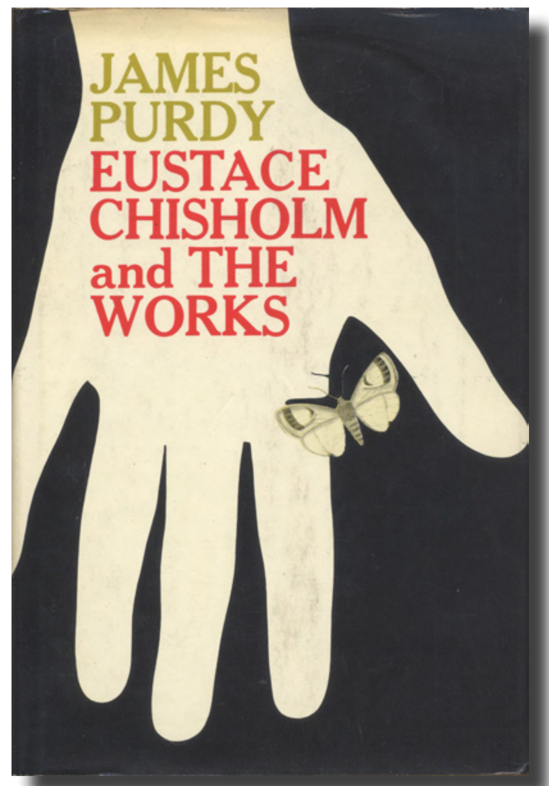
In several novels, Purdy produces formal correlatives between the disorientation of his hapless dislocatees and the vicissitudes of letters addressed to or sent by them. Neither the dispossessed nor the letters follow the official routings through which persons and their messages are supposed to circulate. The plots of *Malcolm*, *Jeremy's Version*, and *On Glory's Course* are organized around breakdowns in the relays connecting the senders of letters to their addressees. In *Mourners Below*, "Brawith," and *In the Hollow of His Hand* Purdy's characters despair of their messages ever reaching their intended destination.

A trilogy of novels that Purdy published over a sixteen-year span—*The Nephew* (1960), *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1968), and *In a Shallow Grave* (1976)—elevated the combat veteran into an archetypical transient. Each of these novels included accounts of combat veterans who were either missing in action or involved in actions that undermined the possibility of their returning home. In the experiences they underwent in between going away and returning from combat, all of Purdy's veterans underwent disconnections from homes to which they could never return. They could not return home without violating the bonds that reproduced home-feeling.

These novels also brought the combat soldiers' feelings of disorientation into conjunction with the erratic trajectories of letters addressed to or sent by them. In each of these novels, Purdy conveyed the soldier's anxious sense of transience through letters that were either undeliverable, as was Alma Mason's correspondence in *The Nephew*, or were intercepted by an unintended addressee, as Daniel Haws's missives were in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, or that required an alternative courier service for their delivery, as did the love letters Garnet Montrose sent to Georgina Rance in *In a Shallow Grave*.

Of course the difficulties combat veterans confronted upon returning home

from war did not originate with Purdy. The recovery from war was the defining theme of the generation of novelists with whose work Purdy's has been affiliated. The difficulties returning veterans experienced in adjusting to a postwar environment marked by social as well as sexual upheaval became the preferred subject matter of soldier novelists like Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal, whose readers scrutinized their subsequent novels for indications of what would count as a successful transition from military to civilian life. Representations of the war veteran enjoyed such immense popularity in the post-World War II era that the figure was elevated to the standing of a national archetype in Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*.



The stories these soldiers brought back from the battlefields played a crucial role in defining masculinity. Citizen soldiers played crucial roles in articulating gender norms to the emerging typology—the corporation man, the dutiful suburban husband and father—of postwar culture. Having survived the nightmare of war, they were compensated with the opportunities of a booming economy that benefited from the international marketplace to which the battlefield had sutured the nation. The GI bill gave returning veterans access to liberal arts colleges and universities and the assurance that their service in the military chain of command prepared them for work in comparably hierarchical corporations.

Construed as efforts to shape the nation's postwar response to social tensions, veterans' efforts at readjustment were interpreted within the context of a more pervasive form of psycho-social engineering known as the cold war. The cold war supervised the postwar recovery by securing the nation's willingness in peacetime to submit to wartime discipline. When functioning as a dynamic structure internal to a veteran's (or any other citizen's) psychology, the cold war described the ideological threat to the national security as an alien psychosexual force: in quite insidious ways "becoming communist" and "becoming homosexual" came to refer to more or less interchangeable fears.

In the short story "You Reach for Your Hat," Purdy explored the relationship between the anxieties of combat veterans who returned home after the Second World War and the predicament confronting women who were expected to conform to the role of suburban housewife. The story consists of a dialogue between two war widows who turn the idioms through which

they are supposed to mourn their husbands' deaths into vehicles for giving expression to their ambivalent reaction to their soldier-husbands' sexual performances: "He never was a real lively one," Lafe's widow observed of the deceased, "but he had a kind of hard, enduring quality in him that must have been hard to put out. He must have died slow, hard and knowing to the end."

In addition to the war-time heroes who underwent effortless transitions from the battlefield to the board room, there were combat veterans who could not accommodate themselves to the cold war mentality. The cold war required returning veterans to remove from their memories of war experiences and events that were incompatible with the themes and representations of the cold war's narrative. Veterans who were either unwilling or unable to disavow their wartime experiences felt disconnected from the social order to which they returned. As long as they remained exiled from their own lived experiences, these combat veterans also felt exiled within the postwar social order.

Jim Willard, the protagonist of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, returned home with the expectation that he would resume the homoerotic relationship with Bob Ford that he began before he entered the military. But Vidal's story of Willard's relationship violated the constraints controlling what was and what was not representable in the novels about the men engaged in US military campaigns. Indeed Gore Vidal's account of Willard's resumption of the erotic relations between two all-American men after the war became the grounds for critics to deprive him of the right to continue to bear the mantle of the soldier novelist.

In his trilogy, Purdy linked the theme of the unaddressable or undeliverable or unwriteable letter to the difficulties that war veterans confronted in their efforts to return home. When he connected the stories of disoriented war veterans to the topos of the disrupted letter, Purdy located the dimensions of the veterans' stories that could not be adequately conveyed within official or unofficial narratives. Each of the novels in his trilogy represented military action itself as having undermined the possibility of the veteran's successfully returning home. Each novel also disconfirmed the American home as an adequate site of social integration. The combat actions in which Purdy's veterans participated were peculiar in that they either took place in settings—Korea in *The Nephew*, Vietnam in *In a Shallow Grave*—that did not corroborate the nation's self-representation as a victory culture, or, as in the case of the World War II setting of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, the combat action described could not take place on a battlefield.

Missing in Action

The Nephew opens with Alma Mason's discovery that the letters she and her widower brother Cliff Mason were used to receiving from their nephew Cliff while he was serving a tour of military duty on Korea were no longer getting delivered. Cliff was raised by Boyd and Alma from the age of 14 after his parents were killed in a plane crash. Upon receiving word that their nephew was missing in action, Alma and her brother remarked comparable lacunae in his letters: "there's nothing in what he writes now, and never has been,"[1] Boyd explained of what he found missing from his nephew's correspondence.

Cliff's having gone missing causes Alma to lose track of the narrative thread through which she made sense of the world:

> After the letters from Cliff had stopped, Alma found it more and more difficult to remember the definite order of events. Things seemed to be happening without sequence, and all at once. There was no longer an orderly progression: Korea, hydrogen bombs, the conquest of outer space—all suddenly came to mean to her merely an interruption or postponement of regular and coherent daily events which could no longer be remembered conveniently. (53)

The Nephew recounts Alma's attempt to recover her bearings by composing a memoir that would replace Cliff's absence with a chain of causally interconnected memories. Alma's search for facts with which to remember him was part of a more pervasive structure of denial that Alma had erected to prevent her from knowing her nephew.

When her brother Boyd reminded her of the fact that Cliff's letters were nondescript to the point of being devoid of content, he aroused anxieties in Alma about what was missing from her own life. Alma in fact knew nothing of substance about her nephew, and the fact that Alma now knew that she knew nothing about him became a mirror that revealed her own life as comparably vacant. In reaction, Alma picked a fight with Boyd over whether he or she would be the first to disbelieve that Cliff would return alive. "Of course *missing,* she told herself each hour of the day, was not the same as *will not return*." After Boyd responded that he just didn't know whether Cliff would return, Alma cried "I *know* he'll return . . . in the same tone she employed in her religious and political arguments" (15-16).

Before receiving the news that Cliff was missing in action in Korea, Alma had divided her time between planning a gift shop and competing with her

brother over who would receive more letters from their nephew. But after the government reported him missing, Alma fantasized herself and Boyd embroiled in a more rudimentary struggle:

> She had not understood it, but after he had been reported missing, she came for the first time to acknowledge to herself, if not to others, the fundamental, if indefinable, importance he had assumed in her life, and she was often sure that it was she and not Boyd who felt Cliff would never come back. (28)

In this reverie, Alma has imagined the superiority of her intimacy with their nephew as the result of her privileged foreboding of his absolute loss.

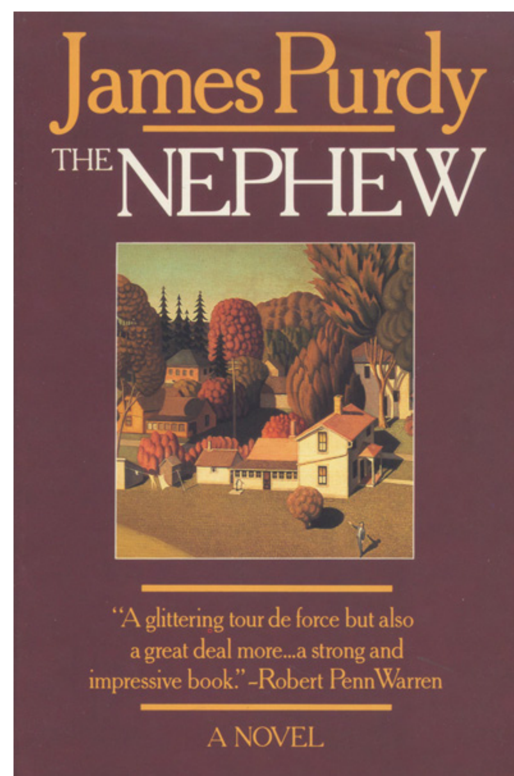
In the wake of this revelation, Alma decided that her memoir would secure the primacy of her affection for Cliff. But Alma's need to write Cliff's memoir did not arise from the intensity of her bereavement. What Cliff meant to her was lost on Alma while he was alive. The bits and pieces of information she gathered did not result in a coherent story about her nephew. Writing the memoir instead became Alma's way of recovering the loss of Cliff's significance—by recording it.

The memoir included an inventory of the facts that the people in their hometown told Alma of what they knew about her nephew. Alma wanted the detailed facts about his comings and goings in Rainbow Center to make up for the perceived deficiencies of her nephew's letters. The memories of him supplied to her by the townspeople enabled Alma to continue to receive new messages about her nephew, even after the United States government declared him missing in action. Choosing to interpret his disappearance as the effect of a breakdown in the operations of the postal service, Alma attempted to continue her correspondence with him along the relays of her neighbors' memories rather than the postal system. However Alma's very efforts to ward off knowledge of Cliff's death instead caused her to discover the unsurpassable distance separating Cliff's Rainbow Center from hers.

In conducting interviews for her memoir, Alma encountered close acquaintances that her nephew never permitted her to know. In looking for facts with which to remember him Alma discovered insuperable impasses. Alma's efforts to record her neighbors' recollections of her nephew led to revelations about other members of the community that Alma either had not known or could not bring herself to admit knowing.

Alma increasingly learned that the meaning-giving framework organizing her memoir could not include crucial aspects of her nephew's character. Because

the activities and townspeople with whom Cliff was involved could not be represented within Alma's interior map, she lacked the affective cognitive coordinates with which to make sense of his world. She and Cliff belonged to sections of Rainbow Center that did not converge. Alma could not get to where Cliff had been from where she herself was living. When she retraced Cliff's itinerary in Rainbow Center, Alma entered places where she felt herself a stranger.



The differences between her neighbors' accounts of her nephew and her own recollections left Alma frightened and disoriented. She caught glimpses of a spectral figure that emerged out of the difference between her memories of her nephew and accounts of him that were utterly incompatible with her recollections. The most disorienting revelations concerning her nephew were communicated by Vernon Miller, the lover of Alma's next door neighbor, Willard Baker. Alma's conversations with Vernon were notable for the absence from them of euphemisms and half-truths. When she asked whether her nephew truly loved her, Vernon replied forthrightly. "Cliff hated Rainbow . . . He hated taking your and his uncle's charity. He hated being without parents and thinking he was unwanted. He hated for you to feel you had to love him. He never wanted to come back here and to hear from anybody . . . He was too proud to think anyone felt they wanted to love him. He thought nobody could love him or wanted him to stay with them." Vernon concluded the interview with the observation that "He only knew that he wanted to run off" (130-131).

> Vernon's news of her nephew's need to get away aroused a compulsive need in Alma to establish the indissolubility of her bond to him.
>
> "You told me the truth and I believe it," Alma finally responded to Vernon, "but if you think I don't love Cliff all the more for hearing it, you're mistaken. Because I see how much more he needed the little love anyone can give."

Alma wanted to prove that she harbored memories of Cliff that were more intimate than Vernon's. Although Alma and Vernon each possessed revealing photographs of Cliff, they depicted utterly incompatible images of him. These

photographs brought what was utterly incompatible in their memories into stark visibility.

When Alma began writing Cliff's memoir, she had her favorite photograph of him retouched so that he would look as if he'd just emerged from a pool of Platonic water. Shortly after Alma and Boyd received the news that Cliff was dead and that there were no remains to be sent home, they were awakened by a blazing fire at Vernon Miller and Willard Baker's house. After breaking in, Alma discovered a series of life-sized photographs of her nephew strung along Vernon Miller's bedroom walls just as the room and the all of its contents were about to be consumed by flames. "Together with the flames and the hour of the night, Cliff seemed, burning in the conflagration of the room, about to speak, his one hand extended to them, as if in life, in an eloquent orator's gesture"(109).

Vernon said that Cliff did not love Alma, and that he wanted to escape from her. But it was the nephew's separation from her that brought Alma into communication with previously unknown facets of Rainbow Center and herself. Ironically it was not until she was driven out of the world in which she felt at home that Alma discovered a self who could truly care.

Vernon's observations enabled Alma to obey the moral imperative "let the dead bury the dead." Before Alma could come to terms with the nephew's death she had to let the self through whom she would remember him be buried along with him. In place of Cliff's remains, Alma acquired affective memories that her home was structured out of excluding. Alma's household became unhomely after Alma lost the capacity to repress the differences between her home and "the nephew."

The news of her nephew's actual death conferred a kind of finality on Alma's labors. But once the news finally took, her resourceful mind turned the information into one more memory for the book. After his death, the nephew first became Boyd's son: "Boyd told himself that he would have liked—he would have given anything—for Cliff to be his son"(107). Then this prodigal son in death returns home: "I am glad it is over, and Cliff, too, can come home now in one way or another. We will now know where he is" (113). Finally, he becomes their son: "Our boy is dead" (121).

Purdy's novel delivered the unclaimable knowledge that Alma had acquired in place of her nephew's remains. It also disclosed Alma's fear of the knowledge she has taken such pains to acquire. In gathering materials for her memoir, Alma discovered that her love was borne by her unacknowledged knowledge of Cliff to which *The Nephew* bears witness. Her nephew was thereby translated into the material relays for the delivery of messages about him and herself Alma would have preferred to disavow.

In the concluding conversation between Alma and her new best friend Faye

Baird, Alma found the words with which she simultaneously claimed and disclaimed the truth about her neighbors and herself.

> "You know of course, everybody has always said Willard and Vernon were homosexuals," Faye said in ringing tones.
>
> "I'm afraid I didn't," Alma said.
>
> Faye stared at her for a good minute and then she saw indeed that Alma did not know . . .
>
> "You weren't aware of their reputations," Faye said weakly.
>
> "No, Faye, I was not," Alma said, an insipid smile playing about her mouth, "I don't know homosexuals," she added.
>
> "I'm sorry then I told you."
>
> "Don't be sorry about telling me anything," Alma came back at her. "I'm afraid I don't know a great many things."
>
> Then in an almost childish, supplicating voice Alma said: Those reports about Willard and Vernon weren't . . . true."
>
> When Faye did not reply, Alma cried:
>
> "Those reports, Faye, were not true!"
>
> "I don't know," Faye replied. "And I don't care."
>
> "You don't care," Alma repeated, and she turned away again.
>
> "When he asked me to marry him, I felt the decision to say yes had been given to me. It was not my decision. But it was something I felt I had to do."
>
> "It's your life, Faye, and you must do what you should do." (117)

In this dialogue, Alma and Faye have communicated knowledge about Vernon and Willard along with the structures of disavowal that suppress their recognition that it is knowledge they are communicating. Throughout their conversation, the assertion of the truth became so intertwined with its suppression that it was impossible to distinguish truth from its denial. Their mutual suppression of this knowledge sustained Alma's and Faye's capacity to remain recognizable to each other and themselves.

In *The Nephew* Purdy composed his signature narrative idiom out of the intricate connection between the desire to know the most intimate dimensions of those one loves and the simultaneous need to remain completely ignorant of them. Purdy's art differed from Alma's memoir in that it entwined the knowledge she would disclaim so thoroughly with the forces through which she disclaimed this knowledge that his readers could not know what it was they were disclaiming. *The Nephew* conveyed this undeliverable knowledge by relaying it through the very structures of disavowal through which it was otherwise suppressed.

Not only Alma, but all of Purdy's characters embody affective intensities that are at once beyond telling yet uncannily familiar. Purdy might be described as having written *The Nephew* at the site of the difference between the memoir that would convert Cliff into a series of retrievable images and Alma's recognition of the impossibility of remembering him in those terms. *The Nephew* is expressive of an anti-memory that works by undoing the images through which Cliff remained unrecognizable to Alma while he was alive. Purdy's anti-memoir accomplished this undoing by translating Alma's strategies of denial into the means through which the novelist revealed the most intimate dimensions of her character. Indeed when we consider that Alma's inability to complete the memoir resulted from her need to disavow what she learned in preparing to write it, we discover that Purdy has quite literally composed *The Nephew* out of Alma's disavowals. *The Nephew* delivered the letters Alma perforce left out of her memoir.

The Missing Action

The news that their nephew was missing in action did not result in the inclusion of what remained of him within the community of Rainbow Center. Alma's unsuccessful attempt to integrate the community's heterogeneous memories of her nephew into her memoir produced knowledge about the community and herself that she had previously foreclosed. The combat veteran who was missing in action thereby became the matrix for the production of an alternative kinship system whose conditions of belonging comprised the formerly disavowed aspects of Alma and the other members of Rainbow Center.

But whereas *The Nephew* inaugurated the founding of an alternative community out of the unclaimable remains of an MIA, in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Purdy went about representing the missing action upon which the American social order was founded. In that novel, Purdy turned his narrative attention away from socially prevalent structures of repression and refocused it upon a writer, Eustace Chisholm, whose friends were mutilated by these structures. Eustace Chisholm's circle of friends resembled Purdy's fugitives in that they did not construct their identities out of pre-existing norms.

The prostitutes, bastards, and impoverished artists who crash at Eustace Chisholm's pad all shared the experience of the unworkability of existing social arrangements. Eustace calls the shelter he provided these transients "the clearing house for busted dreams."[2]

The "works" in the title refer to the epic poem Eustace Chisholm tried to write about the circle of transients who gathered around him. Eustace Chisholm wrote his works over the *fait divers* of city newspapers. His epic displaced the daily newspaper with stories that could not appear within its narrative frame. Eustace composed these stories out of the letters that the transients who crashed at his place either addressed to Eustace or left behind when they departed.

Eustace "pored over found letters, whose messages were not meant for him. To him they were treasures that spoke fully. Paradise to Eustace might have been reading the love letters of every writer, no matter how inconsequential or even illiterate, who had written a *real* one. What made the pursuit exciting was to come on that rare thing: the authentic, naked, unconcealed voice of *love*" (149). The most gifted letter writer in Eustace's circle was the landlord hero of his epic poem, Daniel Haws.

Daniel Haws shared feelings of complete estrangement from the order of things with the other members of Eustace's household. But unlike them, he had internalized the gender norms regulative of the social order during his military service.

> Daniel Haws life had come to a full halt, almost an end, when he had been separated under obscure circumstances from the regular US army. Everything for him since had been sleepwalking in one form or another. It was Army ceremonies and routines that he seemed to be re-enacting at many times of the day. Both Daniel and his roomers seemed to be under the distant but certain jurisdiction of the military, whose ceremonies and rituals reappeared at every moment of the day from breakfast to bedcheck. (72-73)

Daniel Haws discovered that he could not remain within Eustace's circle because one of its members, Amos Ratcliffe, awakened erotic feelings that his military training had compelled him to suppress.

A Greek scholar specializing in the works of Xenophon, Amos Ratcliffe embodied the Platonic homo-erotic ideal out of which Purdy had constructed many of his boy runaways. Amos Ratcliffe's radical innocence and dazzling

beauty made him appear celestial. After he suddenly fell in love with the half-Indian, coal miner's son, Daniel Haws, they enacted one of the primal scenes within Purdy's fiction. When Amos moved into his building, Daniel felt that they were in the army together, and that he was Amos's drill sergeant. So long as he was awake Daniel violently repudiated his love for Amos. But each night Daniel walked through his sleep into Amos Ratcliffe's bedroom.

Daniel's waking state was structured in the forcible exclusion of Amos Ratcliffe from consciousness. But the desire for Amos that Haws violently repudiated while awake entered Haws's sleeping state like a love letter delivered to its addressee by way of a relay of disavowals comparable to those at work in *The Nephew*. Amos Ratcliffe knew that his night visitor was as different from the daytime Daniel as a dream. Sleepwalkers as his Cousin Ida had informed him "don't remember a thing, especially where they have walked" (29). But one evening Amos wakened Daniel from out of the sleep through which he walked and confronted him with the fact of his love: "Don't leave me," the boy said; "I need for you to stay" (53). When Amos acknowledged the truth of their love, Haws vomited so violently that it appeared "as if now he would part with his guts" (77). But this disallowed desire was in him more than himself.

During his previous stay in the military Daniel Haws had internalized the gender norms of the social order. He decided to re-enlist in the Army at the discovery of his nocturnal breach of those norms. But at 2:30 AM of his very first night back, Daniel sleepwalked into the tent of Captain Stadger, a man who had identified himself so thoroughly with military discipline that he personified its strictures.

Daniel wrote Eustace that when Stadger disciplined him, "he is not looking at my face, he is gazing around me, as if he thought he might spy me wearing side-arms. Looking at some part of my body he can't seem to find." Rather than instructing him in how to act like a man, Captain Stadger initiated a relationship with Daniel Haws that brought both men into intimate relations with the parts of themselves that could not be contained within those norms.

> Now with Captain Stadger he was already in death's kingdom. He knew he would never get out of the captain's hands unless he allowed him to take some part of his body as the price of severance, and a wild animal will dismember its own leg from the trap to go loose. He knew from the first time he saw Captain Stadger watching him, as though he had seen him years ago in some ancient dream that he would have to surrender part of his flesh or go down forever to the realm the captain ruled. (161)

The ritualized relationship between Stadger and Daniel Haws brought into visibility the foundational act of violence—the annihilation of the homoerotic bond—formative of the postwar social order. The ritual was expressive of their courage to confront the most subversive of the enemies that American men confronted during the 50 years of imaginary combat known as the cold war. After the Second World War, homosexuality's putative psychological association with communism led to its demonization as a deadly threat to American masculinity. In his representation of this ritual, Purdy depicted Stadger's mutilations of Haws's body as a displaced form of battlefield combat. This combat operation involved each man in a deadly struggle with parts of himself that military discipline had forcibly dissociated. As Stadger confronted the homosexual specter that lurked within Daniel Haws, his means of ferreting out and then attacking this invisible enemy expressed the homo-erotic basis for their bonds.

Homo-erotic love and its homo-phobic annulment were thereby conflated into a combat ritual in which the expression of love took the form of destroying the agent who might act upon it. This extraneous military ritual involved both men in the forcible and violent exclusion of the parts of both of them that was not amenable to military discipline. Stadger was the man who knew what Haws wanted. That very knowledge was a sign of his love. The consummation of their love perforce assumed the form of destroying the figure who aroused it. But under the guise of destroying this figure, Stadger delivered Haws to the most intimate secrets of his being.

Captain Stadger inaugurated these rituals after intercepting a letter in which Haws confessed his love for Amos Ratcliffe to Eustace Chisholm. "How did you show Amos your love," Captain Stadger wanted to know.

> I never loved Amos with my body, sir! That's what I wanted to say, I never loved him so, sir!
>
> How did you love the cocksucker? . . .
>
> I loved him as myself . . .
>
> Captain Stadger then struck the private with all the accumulated force of a man made criminal by all the hard years behind him and the hate and the need.
>
> "You'll love who you're told to love, you fucking bastard, and you'll talk about what we decide to talk about!" (169).

Whereas Daniel wanted to be punished for never having given bodily expression to his love, Captain Stadger wanted to replace the forbidden lover. Haws could only repudiate Amos by having his insides quite literally taken out of him. In extirpating the homosexual specter inhabiting Haws, Captain Stadger also confronted the most subversive of the cold war's enemies. But Stadger could not engage this enemy without acting upon the homo-erotic desire he was hell-bent on annihilating in Haws.

In the horrific scene that followed Haws's confession, Captain Stadger ritualistically disemboweled him. Haws could only give complete expression to his love for Amos through its complete destruction, and that destruction could only be accomplished by a man who loved Daniel Haws enough to know that it was love he needed to destroy. Homoerotic love and its homophobic annihilation were thus quite literally conflated in a ritual that destroyed both participants.

The Missing

Purdy concluded *The Nephew* with the reassuring maxim that caring is "a reality, even if the caring and the cared-for lack the gift to say it or write it" (95). Alma's inability supplied Purdy with the rationale for writing *The Nephew*: he wrote it in the place of Alma who lacked the gift. Purdy concluded *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* with Eustace's prayer that he be disburdened of this gift: "I'm not a writer" Eustace protests, "That's my news; I never was and never will be." The difference between Alma's declaration of her incapacity and Eustace's was that Alma stated the truth while Eustace disavowed it. In the final novel of what I've called the returning veteran trilogy, *In a Shallow Grave*, Purdy took up characters who were irretrievably excluded from the social order, and who turned to one another rather than a memoirist for care. This novel provided Purdy with the occasion to remake the world out of the relations between persons who were quite literally missing from the social order.

Purdy's *In a Shallow Grave* correlated the theme of undeliverable letter with the plight of an inassimilable war veteran by depicting the latter as a psyche whose corporeal envelope was mutilated beyond recognition. *In a Shallow Grave* recounted the plight of Purdy's most macabre creations. Garnet Montrose is a soldier who, after having been buried under a pile of dead comrades, miraculously survived. He has returned from Vietnam. But the body in which he returns is so disfigured with all the veins and arteries exposed on the mulberry surface of his skin that Montrose considers himself a corpse trapped within an envelope of mutilated skin and compelled to relive his own death.

The Nephew and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* included characters

who aspired to reclaim experiences that the combat veteran felt compelled to disavow, like Garnet Montrose, who could not be assimilated to any pre-existing category of identity. Unlike most of Purdy's characters, who disavow the experiences that disfigure them, Garnet Montrose is composed out of the breakdown of these structures of foreclosure. Daniel Haws could only be released from the pain of unacted upon love by having his insides taken outside of him. But Garnet Montrose inhabits a body that the war has quite literally turned inside out.

Tony Tanner, who has written what is perhaps the most insightful commentary on Purdy's novels, has asked apropos of his radically inassimilable characters: "But if you do manage to elude all of society's imposed definitions and are free of the world, where do you then go from there?"[3] The setting of *In a Shallow Grave* might be imagined as Purdy's way of providing an answer to Tanner's question. This novel, which portrays a Vietnam veteran who fears that he is either about to pass over into non-being or has already done so would appear to have been set quite literally at the edge of doom.

The characteristic setting for Purdy's novels is composed of two intersecting yet incompatible spaces—the one from which his characters have become dislocated and the one from which they must escape. *In a Shallow Grave* melds these two spaces into one. If Garnet Montrose were not excluded from accepted social arrangements, he would have tried to escape from them. Here the experiences that Purdy's characters would disclaim and the structures through which they would disclaim them converge into a place of no return that requires the storyteller of the unhomed to imagine.

NOTES

[1] James Purdy, *The Nephew* (New York: Avon, 1960), 9. All further references to this book will be made parenthetically.

[2] James Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (New York: Bantam, 1967). All further references to this book will be made parenthetically.

[3] Tony Tanner, *The City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 92.

published in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, a web publication of The Nietzsche Circle: www.nietzschecircle.com, Volume VI, issue 1, March 2011