

James Purdy

by Stathis Orphanos

Hyperion, Volume VI, issue 1, March 2011

JAMES PURDY

by **Stathis Orphanos, photographer**

In 1981 I embarked on a photo odyssey that took me from Los Angeles into New England and the South. I had arranged to photograph authors I had recently published, or was about to publish, in limited-signed editions under the imprint of Sylvester & Orphanos, a new firm specializing in letterpress printing and fine, hand-bound books. The authors I contacted were John Cheever, Reynolds Price, James Purdy, Philip Roth, William Styron, John Updike, and Tennessee Williams. Each responded affirmatively to my photo requests and I embarked from Los Angeles mid-October with my friend Gyula Visnyei, (aka MISL soccer luminary Juli Veee), who assisted me during his off seasons. Crossing the country in a camper within three days, we succeeded in keeping our first appointment, which was with John Updike.

Photo sessions with William Styron and Philip Roth, both residing in Connecticut, were concluded within two days, followed by a spirited sitting with John Cheever in Ossining, New York. A City sitting with James Purdy was next. Reynolds Price, in Durham, North Carolina, was to be the final subject of this trip. A visit to Tennessee Williams in Key West had to be canceled. A change in my athlete friend's soccer schedule required him to be back in Los Angeles before the end of October, a week earlier than planned, and, therefore, I had to forgo photographing our most esteemed playwright.

Of all my encounters on this journey, my session with James Purdy was the most subdued. Though not guarded, he was reserved. From the first photograph to the last his mournful expression never changed. Preferring to work with natural sunlight, I was dismayed to discover that the only suitable available light within his dark apartment, a single room, emanated from one window. We began near that source and then proceeded to the center of the room where, utilizing a strobe, I photographed him before a fireplace, it's mantle cluttered with bric-a-brac. Framed vintage prints of handsome boxers hung above. As I paused to reload the cameras, I attempted to engage him in conversation. Though reticent, it was evident that he was eager to please, and welcomed all attempts to draw him into a dialogue. Aware that Dorothy

Parker had praised his novel “Malcolm,” I informed him that Parker had been a guest teacher at a local college I had attended in Los Angeles in the ‘60s, and that I had taken her class, entitled “The Angry Young Men,” a study of the plays of Albee, Osborne, and Pinter. I then revealed that she hated the school, the administration, and most of the students. When Parker was informed by a Los Angeles Times interviewer that the college was built above a tar pit, that its buildings were sinking a few millimeters a year, and that within a thousand years or so the entire institution would disappear into the bowels of the Los Angeles basin, her response was: “Not fast enough for me!”

After concluding our photo session, Purdy surprised us by suggesting that we dine with him at one of his favorite restaurants. He took us on a stroll through his Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, pausing at the Promenade for us to view the imposing NYC skyline before leading us to an African-American restaurant located near the base of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Conversation at dinner was brisk, a discussion mostly about photography; and, since I was aware of Purdy’s close friendship with Carl Van Vechten I spoke about several of his portraits that I admired, images of Gore Vidal, William Faulkner, Jacqueline Kennedy, and a young sensual Marlon Brando. I mentioned that I was influenced by Van Vechten’s use of ornately decorated cloths as backdrops, having recently photographed Julie Harris, dressed in one of her Charlotte Bronte costumes, posing before a paisley pattern reminiscent of a Carl Van Vechten backdrop.

When we finally departed several hours later, it was with hugs and kisses. It was an honor to have photographed this gentle giant of American Literature.

Editor’s Note: *Photographs of James Purdy by Stathis Orphanos also can be found on the cover and on pages 11, 28, 122, and 205.*

