Forget Me Not

Art

In 1978, artist Camille Billops gathered James Van Der Zee's portraits of Harlem's dead into a book paired with verse and testimony. This fall, the landmark work returns, carrying its remembrance into the present.

Words by

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"It is true what Africans say: The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember," Toni Morrison writes in her foreword to *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Conceived and edited by Camille Billops, the volume first appeared in 1978, preserving James Van Der Zee's mortuary portraits of Harlem's dead, at a moment when he, then 91, risked fading into obscurity. Alongside poems by Owen Dodson and Billops' extended interview with the photographer, the project offers a window into both Harlem's funeral traditions and Van Der Zee's own life. Now, 47 years later, it reenters circulation in a new edition from Primary Information, joining wider efforts to preserve and contextualize the late artist's archive.

When he sat with Billops decades after many of the photographs were captured, Van Der Zee could still summon the particulars of each face: the young woman shot dead by her sweetheart at a party, laid to rest with flowers across her chest; the boy from the National Broadcasting Company struck by a car, his colleagues gathered in mourning; the father cradling his infant daughter so the mother, too ill to leave the hospital, might see her baby one last time. This last portrait is doubled by Dodson's verse, written from the father's perspective: "You'll always be my baby now, / Johnella. Dream sometimes of Papa. / When you marry an angel boy, / The very best, / I'll attend your wedding."

Much like Dodson, a Harlem Renaissance heir whose dramas and elegies attended to the textures of Black life, Van Der Zee's images reveal layers: at once tender documents and transcendent visions. Many of his depictions of the deceased are embellished with angels reaching down, excerpts of scripture, halos of light, even illustrations of the subject alive. These interventions, often hand-painted or airbrushed onto the negatives, were not only

attempts to satisfy the undertaker's request that the dead appear more lifelike but also gestures toward the afterlife, portraying grief in both fact and faith. Yet as these photographs reached toward eternity, their maker remained a man shaped by his own beginnings.

Born in 1886 in Lenox, Massachusetts, Van Der Zee grew up in a household where prophecy and ritual were part of daily life. He was brought up polite, God-fearing, and steady. His grandfather was a gravedigger and later sexton of the town's Congregational church. His mother often stood at the foot of his bed with auguries, while his father, a butler and waiter, was a model of dignity. His family's houses stood almost shoulder to shoulder, close enough that faith, work, and kinship blurred together. In his adolescence, Van Der Zee learned violin, played dance music with local bands, and worked odd hotel jobs, always seeing the world in arrangements, already framing life as if it were a picture. At 14, he received his first camera and began documenting his family and neighbors with the composure that would later define his portraits.

By the 1920s, he was in New York, where he established himself as Harlem's portraitist of choice. He composed a collective record of the neighborhood's emergent Black middle class, countering the caricatures that dominated the era's popular newspapers and magazines. Theatrical and meticulous, his portraits were also tender, intimate, and full of care. He captured weddings, parades, sports clubs, church congregations, infantrymen like the Harlem Hellfighters, and funerals, where he granted families the dignity of being remembered as they wished. Death, too, pressed on his home life. The photographer lost two children: Rachel, his first, who died of appendicitis as a teenager, and Emile, his son who lived only a year. Their absence impressed on him a yearning for images that kept the departed close, inspiring the overlays he later added to his prints. That impulse found its fullest expression in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.

The book's return to print underscores Morrison's insistence that remembrance itself is survival. Yet, when asked by Billops how he felt about his own death, Van Der Zee, ever modest, replied that he hoped "tears will dim few eyes and those who do weep will soon forget." To remember him is not to mourn, but to keep him, and the Harlem he chronicled, alive.