

“How Living Are His Portraits of the Dead.” Toni Morrison on the Photography of James Van Der Zee

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Below is Toni Morrison’s introduction to [The Harlem Book of the Dead](#) by James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops

It is fashionable these days to hear among photography lovers the cry, “Oh, those early photographers really knew how to take pictures.” Part of the enthusiasm is not critical evaluation but simple nostalgia: a love affair with the past made more loving because the beloved is no longer with us and able to assert itself. Part of it is simple weariness—weariness of contemporary photojournalism that comes pouring into our living rooms via newspapers, magazines, television and film documentaries.

When we look at the work of James Van Der Zee, however, the statement is neither sentimental nor reactionary. His photography is truly rare—*sui generis*. What is so clear in his pictures and so marked in his words is the passion and the vision, not of the camera but of the photographer. The narrative quality, the intimacy, the humanity of his photographs are stunning, and the proof, if any is needed, is in this collection of pictures devoted exclusively to the dead about which one can only say, “How living are his portraits of the dead.” So living, so “undead,” that the prestigious writer, Owen Dodson, is stirred to poetry in which life trembles in every metaphor.

That this remarkable concert of Black subject, Black poet, Black photographer and Black artist focuses on the dead is significant for it is true what Africans say: “The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember.” [The Harlem Book of the Dead](#), conceived and nurtured by Camille Billops, cherishes that remembrance and enlightens us as only memory can.

—Toni Morrison

Poetry by Owen Dodson.

*Death always happens
To somebody else,
Not the dead.*

*Somebody—friends,
Somebody—aunts,
Cousins, nephews, mothers,*

*Fathers, sisters, brothers—
Not the dead.*

*Can I use my boy scout knife
To carve the bark of birch trees
And send cards to Mama and Popa
Signed with your name and mine,
Jesus, do you think?*

*I thought when I died,
I would be dead,
But worms are after the tongue
I preached salvation with.
You'd think they would've waited
Till I was in the dirt
And my flowers dead.*

*They been waitin' here
Since I was born, I reckon.
I won't be nowhere near whole
On resurrection day
To join the hosts.*

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