

James Van Der Zee's Dreamlike Images of the Departed

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You could tell that he was getting back to work when the drinking stopped and the parties stopped. Sitting in uneasy silence—he hated being alone, but, spiritually, he was always alone—he'd put a pad of lined yellow paper on his clipboard and, in his strong, decorous hand, he'd start jotting down a world that honored his imagination, and his dead.

The dead were always with Owen—Owen Dodson, poet, theatre-maker, and onetime Howard University professor, who was the first person to direct James Baldwin's first play, "The Amen Corner," in 1955. (The theatre department at Howard didn't want to do it because Baldwin's characters spoke "Black English" at a time when mid-Atlantic was the goal, but Dodson did it anyway.)

That was long before I met Dodson, in the early nineteen-seventies, when I was fourteen. We were introduced by a woman he'd known since elementary school, in Brooklyn—now a schoolteacher who worked with my mother and who, like my mother, believed that I had a future as a writer. Soon after that, Dodson invited me over to his place to pick up some books he wanted to give away; eventually, our relationship changed, and my casual benefactor became my complicated mentor. I spent a great deal of time after school in his beautifully furnished apartment on West Fifty-first Street and learned so much there. I saw things I had hitherto seen only in books or in my imagination: beautiful Cocteau drawings, Victorian sofas, free-standing candelabras straight out of a nineteenth-century play. Dodson also had an extensive collection of art and photography books, including a first edition of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "[The Decisive Moment](#)," and a book by and about a photographer I'd never heard of before, a man with a Dutch-sounding name: James Van Der Zee.

Titled "[The World of James Van Derzee](#)," the book, which was published in 1969 and included a sizable number of Van Der Zee's photographs of Black Americans in the early twentieth century, had a cover that fascinated me as much as the image of a Matisse collage on the cover of the Cartier-Bresson volume did. Van Der Zee's cover photo showed four elegantly dressed Black men sporting derbys. Three of them wore bow ties, while the fourth, an older gentlemen with an impressive gray mustache, had on a necktie and a vest, with a pocket watch tucked into it. I didn't get the feeling that these men had dressed up for the camera; rather, they were showing the beauty of everyday formality. The picture was tinted, sepia-colored, but, even through that scrim, I could see the ease the men felt at being together—an ease that I had never felt.

I wanted to know everything about those men. (I didn't discover until later that it was a portrait of Van Der Zee, his brothers, and their father.) With painting and drawing, you first want to know something about the artist; with photography, the subject is the lure. The best photographers

frame their images with a kind of amazed humility: *Look at this!* And what Van Der Zee wanted us to see in that photograph, and in all his photographs that I saw then, was how the spectacular and the commonplace could exist in a single frame, and how interested he was in all of it, even the dead.

Portrait of Van Der Zee's mother, Susan, after her death.

Van Der Zee was born in Lenox, Massachusetts, in 1886. His parents had come up, a few years before, from New York, where they'd worked, as a maid and a butler, for Ulysses S. Grant. Presumably, they'd moved to Massachusetts in pursuit of a better life for their family. (They had six children together.) The couple did prosper in Lenox, eventually owning their own home, as did Van Der Zee's grandparents, who lived next door.

There were few Black families in Lenox, but the Van Der Zees formed their own community of color. A number of their children were artistically inclined: one daughter drew; others, including James, played music. In 1906, when he was twenty, James, by then a burgeoning artist, made his way to New York, where he worked as a waiter and an elevator operator, before opening his first commercial studio, on 135th Street, in Harlem, in 1916. By that time, he had discovered, as he told the photographer Reginald McGhee, that "it was much easier to produce an image with 'the little box' than it was with paints and brushes." He embraced the medium of photography with the kind of passion one associates with amateurs, but, in truth, even his earliest photographs feel distinctive, the work of a romantic anthropologist, guided by instinct, wonder, and personal necessity, rather than staid professionalism.

It was in Harlem that Van Der Zee took his now legendary photographs of an incredible range of subjects, including Black matrons, show-business folks, couples, brides, political figures, and dandies. He moved to 272 Lenox Avenue and, in time, became known as Harlem's "picture-taking man." His moodily lit, primarily black-and-white images remain a powerful evocation of a world that was not so much separated from the white world downtown as not mindful of it.

"I could always see beauty where it didn't exist," Van Der Zee told the artist Camille Billops in 1978. "And I figured, as long as they had two eyes and a nose and a mouth, why, I could improve on them." While he may have made his subjects look better than they thought they did, what he encouraged—you can see it in the pictures—was their sense of well-being. For this brief moment in his studio, there was no fear of being criticized or reviled; the world that he created with his large-format camera was as generous and loving as the other one wasn't.

In 1976, Owen Dodson and his sister, Edith, sat for Van Der Zee. (By then, Van Der Zee was on West Ninety-fourth Street, having been evicted from his home and studio on Lenox Avenue. "We had some bad times with a lawyer who was supposed to be representing us," he told Billops, "and we lost the house of forty-three years to the bank.") In the portrait, Dodson, sporting what Marianne Moore might call a "minimal" hat, is perched on a chair (the same thronelike chair that the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat sat in for his portrait a few years afterward). He grips one of the

chair's armrests while Edith stands, smiling, next to him. Later, Dodson told me that he'd held onto the chair tightly so that he wouldn't be transported back to the nineteen-twenties. Indeed, the only thing in the image that one can recognize as being of its time is Edith's neatly trimmed Afro.

I believe the sitting was arranged by Billops, who was a close friend of Dodson's. Of all the attractive women who visited him, she was the most striking. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Billops wore the world. Her eye makeup reminded me of Nefertiti—all beautifully shaped lines tapering to a point. Often she plaited her hair with brightly colored string. Sometimes she wore slacks that she had picked up on her travels to other continents, with exquisite embroidered tops worthy of inclusion in any museum. She was a United Nations unto herself. She was also a connector. She and her husband, the gentle and wonderful theatre historian James Hatch, whose essential anthologies did a lot to keep Black theatre alive, conducted and recorded conversations with playwrights and artists in their loft, on afternoons that were always filled with the energy of discovery.

There had been a surge of interest in Van Der Zee's work in 1969, when the Met put on its controversial "Harlem on My Mind" show—he had more images in the exhibition than any other artist—but he still wasn't well known outside of art and photography circles. I'm sure that Billops wanted to right that wrong, while also getting Dodson to write again (he hadn't published a book since 1970) and feel included in a world—the poetry world—that was always moving on.

The collaboration that resulted, "The Harlem Book of the Dead" (recently reissued, with an afterword by Karla F. C. Holloway), included a series of Van Der Zee's funerary portraits, photographs of the dead, often with spiritual imagery montaged onto them: babies in coffins with projections of Jesus and flowers floating above them; a widow dressed in black, staring softly into space, beside her husband's open casket; a boy with a picture of his living self superimposed beside his dead one; a young couple smiling down on their dead child, cradled in the father's arms; a beauty with long hair and pale skin, almost overwhelmed by the lavish silk she rests on, and, above her, a winged angel. Just as Van Der Zee wanted to make his living subjects look a little better than they did, he wanted death—or, more accurately, grief—to look better than it was. It was Dodson's job to find words that spoke to the images. He labored on those poems, in the period when I visited him often, with a sort of joy—the photographs had jump-started voices in his head and heart that had long been dormant, and, when he read me the poem that eventually accompanied the image of that young woman in the overdressed coffin, I knew that he was writing about himself:

I had a river in my mind
Where I had drowned myself
So many times I felt sharp flesh
Of water underneath
My eyelids; and between my toes
The minnows smuggle time
To hoard it where all shells begin
To grow what children on the shore
Have always begged to listen to.

I was still a boy, and I had never been so close to the making of a book before. Sometimes, Dodson would call me at home to read me a new verse—"Chile, listen to this"—and I understood how exciting the enterprise was to him, too. Sitting in his living room, or on the bed in his guest room, I remember looking and looking at these strange images, which had the quality of a hallucination or a dream—the only place where the living and the dead meet again and again.

From the long interview that Billops conducted with Van Der Zee, which is threaded throughout the book, I learned that he was frequently hired by the bereaved to shoot photographs of their loved ones in mortuaries, and that the fascinating elements of art direction the families sometimes supplied—one dead man holds a newspaper, as if he were reading, for example—were there to make the dead seem less dead. For his efforts, Van Der Zee got his standard fee—thirty-five dollars a shot.

One picture that fascinated me was a sort of wide-angle image of a body in a coffin with a dark-clothed couple on either side. Van Der Zee inserted a celestial figure above the couple to the right, but what I kept returning to was the movement in the image: both women in the photograph had turned their heads slightly at the moment of exposure. Did the dead person become more dead by contrast with this evidence of movement, of life? To the left of the photograph are these few lines by Dodson:

The dead are the signs
Of our cross;
The bury-hour:
Our living crucifixion.

Dodson sometimes used Van Der Zee's memory of a particular sitting in his writing. At other times, his poems are an act of ventriloquism for the permanently voiceless. His texts made the book feel like a silent film, with its sequence of image, title card, image, each informing the next. And as the writing accumulated—even then, I thought of this as the best verse Dodson ever produced—so did the metaphysical questions that the pictures and poems inspired in me: What is a visual record of the dead? Is the subjective world of words as powerful or as pertinent as the reality of the photographs?

I wasn't afraid of the images so much as I felt my soul spinning in a kind of vortex when I looked at them, especially when I saw the photographs of babies. In one such image, an infant held a bottle it would never drink out of. I knew nothing about postmortem photography then, and, in all likelihood, neither did Van Der Zee. But I wondered: By making death—such an intimate exchange of life for non-life—so public, were we honoring the dead? Or ourselves? Who granted us the right to the stories of the departed?

I don't know who thought to ask Toni Morrison to write the foreword to "The Harlem Book of the Dead." I think it was Dodson who called her. She had been a student of his at Howard, when he was a professor in the theatre department there. He remembered her as "a wonderful actress"; clearly, he felt that there was nothing she couldn't do. In her short introduction, Morrison wrote, "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 book had a significant effect on Morrison. Years later, when I opened her novel "[Jazz](#)," from 1992, I recognized, in Morrison's tale of "spooky" love, a story that Van Der Zee had told in one of his photographs. It's a picture of a girl in a coffin, her head crowned in flowers, more blooms on her chest. In the caption, Van Der Zee said:

She was the one I think was shot by her sweetheart at a party with a noiseless gun. She complained of being sick at the party and friends said, "Well, why don't you lay down?" and they taken her in the room and laid her down. After they . . . loosened her clothes, they saw the blood on her dress. They asked her about it and she said, "I'll tell you tomorrow, yes, I'll tell you tomorrow." She was just trying to give him a chance to get away. For the picture, I placed the flowers on her chest.

Morrison named her Dorcas, and, like the woman in Dodson's accompanying poem—"They lean over me and say: / 'Who deatched you who' "—the dying girl refuses to betray her lover. In this way, Dorcas tells the world that she and the man who shot her will be lovers forever, in the here and now and in the hereafter.

These photographs are drawn from "[The Harlem Book of the Dead](#)," which was first published in 1978, by Morgan & Morgan, and was reissued, in a facsimile edition, by Primary Information, in 2025.