

# THE TIMES



## THE TIMES, LONDON *PUTTING DEATH IN ITS PLACE*

Elizabeth Heyert's year in a funeral home has resulted in the life-affirming celebration of a world between Heaven and Harlem, Erica Wagner says...

ARE THEY SO DISTANT from us, the dead? It is easier, certainly, to keep them at one remove, but in the end, it can't be done. They are us, the dead, they are what we will be, and that's all there is to it.

We (in the West, in what we think of as the modern world) used to be better at marking a passage which is simply the other end of the continuum that begins when a baby is born, a joyous event.

But fortunately the desire to bury the idea of death, and thereby disallow those who still live the freedom to mourn, is not yet universal, as Elizabeth Heyert's beautiful, celebratory photographs show.

The Travelers is a collection of photographs that Heyert, in the course of just over a year, took in the funeral home of Isaiah Owens in Harlem, New York. The project grew out of her earlier book, *The Sleepers*, portraits of a less permanent unconsciousness. But as she worked on this new project she found herself drawn — as she says in an interview printed at the end of the book — into a community alien to her and yet welcoming. "My portraits aren't about death," she says, "but about people's lives."

So they are. Here are people — old and young — dressed in their best, dressed for Paradise, arrayed for a new beginning: and who is to say they are wrong? Heyert remarks that while she did not share their faith, her art, somehow, enabled her to sense it, and you can see how.