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## The Travelers.

Photographs by Elizabeth Heyert.

*Scalo, Zurich, 2005. 80 pp., 33 color illustrations, 11x16½".*

Although thought to be out-of-print, copies of this Scalo book have surfaced and will be released soon, pre-order now.

What happens to us when we die? What happens to us, our sense of who we are, when we stop moving as actors in the world, when we exist only as a thing, an abandoned receptacle whose contents have evaporated? After we "depart," how do our friends and family experience us in the heart's memory? Elizabeth Heyert, whose 2002 work *The Sleepers* examined the mystery of the sleeping self, stumbled across Isaiah Owens' Harlem funeral home in early 2003. Essentially a portraitist, Heyert was captivated by the Southern Baptist practice of meticulous, formal preparation that bodies go through prior to "going to the party," the celebration of entering paradise. Men and women of various ages are carefully decked out in their finest clothes, including hats, gloves, jewelry and Masonic or religious regalia. The embalming process, while unable to bring the dead back to life, achieves an amazing simulacrum of vivid, peaceful repose. Heyert was "on call" for more than a year. Over and over, she set up her 8x10 camera and studio lighting at the funeral home in the early morning hours, after each body was completely prepared to the family's satisfaction, but before the burial service got underway. Her effort is about much more than documenting funeral practices, though. As a white nonbeliever, she became deeply invested in her deceased subjects' personal histories, and the way they fit into the larger story of race in America. Many of her subjects had emigrated from the South in the early part of the 20th century, seeking "a greater chance to be who they wanted to be," as Heyert puts it. As she also points out, it would have been impossible to achieve the kind of intimacy she feels with each person across the racial and class lines that presently exist while they were alive. Death and her respect for her subjects are the key ingredients that open the way to this tender, very personal view of a keenly respectful tradition of dying—a tradition that is itself fading away. PHIL HARRIS

This review was originally published in the Fall 2006 issue of the photo-eye Booklist. To learn more about the Booklist [click here](#).

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