

Black & White: A Poem with Photographs

by Louis Dienes

Reviewed by Len Bernstein and Karen Van Outryve

Louis Dienes (1925-2016) is one of the important poets and also one of the important photographers of America. His images show the dignity and grandeur of everyday situations, people, and objects; they are exciting and powerful. This alone would be reason enough to recommend his recently published book. But another reason is: his poem "Black & White," the basis of this book, is one of the real, musically stirring poems of the last century. And the way Dienes's photographs are combined with that passionate free verse poem makes *Black & White: A Poem with Photographs* truly and mightily remarkable.

In the preface Louis Dienes describes how his study of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism with its founder, the great American educator and poet Eli Siegel, changed his life, because it changed his way of seeing the world. He learned that reality has an aesthetic structure—the *oneness of opposites*—which can be seen in everything that exists. He studied this principle of Aesthetic Realism: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." And the more he tested it, the more he saw it was true and the more he loved it. He began to see new meaning and wonder in things and (to summarize very swiftly) from this seeing came authentic poetry and photographs that will move and strengthen you.

The poem "Black & White" was written on the occasion of a 1957 group exhibition at the Terrain Gallery in New York City, at which many of the photographs in this book were first shown. It begins:

The day black and white got a break
Was the day he and she and they
Thought of those things black and white could convey,
That is, those things could be turned into black and white
And be clear to minds.

Poetry and photography have been related before; but the sincerity, knowledge, and depth of emotion in this book stand out, with each art adding to our feeling and thought about the other. For example, there is a photograph of part of an old vehicle, perhaps a flatbed truck.



We see a large, solid wheel in the midst of unattended nature. Disheveled grasses grow around it, and some seem to touch that heavy wheel in a friendly fashion. Printed next to this image is a line from the poem:

The round wheel's neatness and the grass's nonchalance.

There is music in that line. And poetic music, Eli Siegel was the critic to explain, arises from “the oneness of the permanent opposites in reality as seen by an individual”; it is the *sine qua non* of poetry.

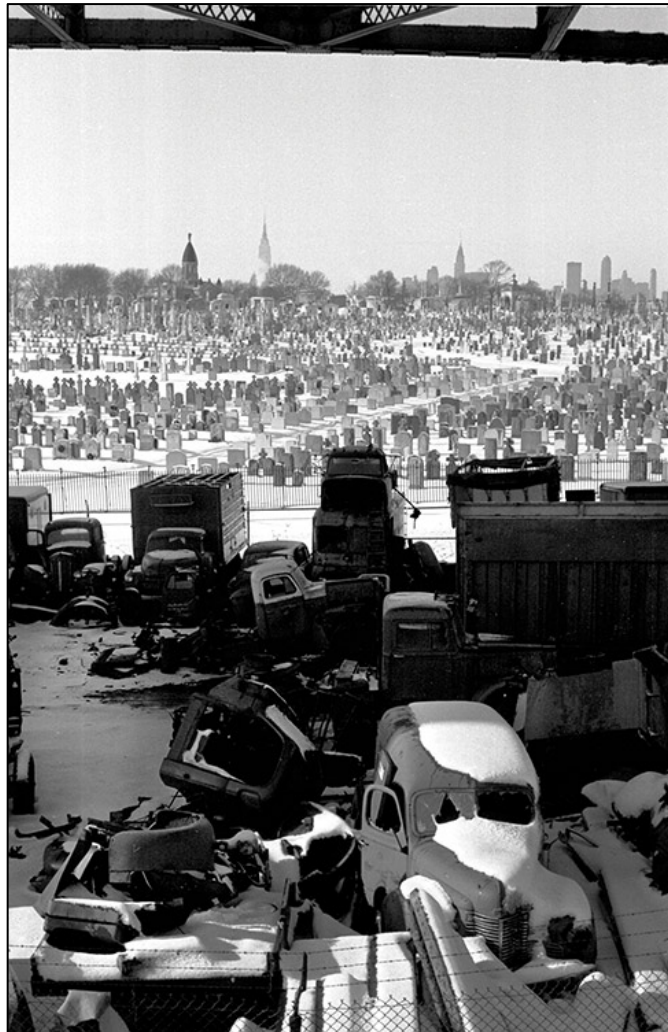
The first part of the line, “*The round wheel's neatness,*” is tight, with three firmly accented syllables in a row (“*round wheel's neat*”); and yet—because of its long *ee* sounds and the motion of the *r*, *wh*, and *ss*—it seems to spin, wheel-like. The line's second part, “*and the grass's nonchalance,*” has a sound that *is* nonchalant, casual, even as it is rhythmical.

Both the photograph and the line put opposites together, including the definite and the easy-going—as every person hopes to do.

We ourselves are a photographer (Len Bernstein) and a poet (Karen Van Outryve) who, like Louis Dienes, have had the honor to study with Eli Siegel and to continue our study of Aesthetic Realism in classes taught by the Chairman of Education, Ellen Reiss. We love the way photography and poetry are joined in this book. It made for big emotions in us. The book shows magnificently what we, too, are grateful to have learned: that a world in which opposites are one is a world we can honestly like.

In the preface Dienes conveys the thrill of learning from Eli Siegel about this deepest of desires, *to like the world*, and how it is opposed by the desire for *contempt*, the false importance a person gets from lessening the value of other people, other things. He describes how his depression ended and never returned because he learned to recognize and criticize contempt in himself.

We'll mention one more of the 30 photographs in this book. It's of an automobile graveyard mostly in shadow, but with a gentle layer of snow that brings light, and even innocence, to some of the discarded objects.



Meanwhile, in the background, the same snow covers a cemetery filled with gravestones stretching into the hazy distance where they meet the skyline of a city. The snow and the relation of things and shapes make what's discarded, and death itself, lively and bright.

Louis Dienes writes in firm, reverberating lines:

The automobile lasts longer
In black and white than in steel.

Those lines are about the power of art. And art, *real* art, is in Louis Dienes's book—as well as the explanation of what art has to do with the life of everyone!



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