

# HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

## 'Vanishing Points' stops to examine roadside memorials

By Alyson Ward | March 24, 2017 | Updated: March 24, 2017 3:56pm



Photo: Dan Streck

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**IMAGE 1 OF 6**

from "Vanishing Points: Poems and Photographs of Texas Roadside Memorials," edited by Sarah Cortez

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Almost everywhere asphalt crisscrosses the Texas landscape, roadside memorials sprout beside the highway. Wooden crosses and stone angels, silk flowers and faded rosaries mark the place where a car ran out of control, a truck flipped into a ditch, a person stepped off the curb at just the wrong moment.

Photographer Dan Streck has been documenting those memorials for more than a decade, and he's built a large collection of images that capture these handmade monuments to grief.

His friend Sarah Cortez, a Houston poet, has turned those photographs into a book that pays tribute to the dead and to the ways we mourn them. "Vanishing Points: Poems and Photographs of Texas Roadside Memorials" pairs Streck's photographs with poems by Cortez and three

others. It's a sobering, gorgeous collection that was recently named one of the Southwest Books of the Year by the library system in Tucson, Ariz.

Cortez first saw some of Streck's photos in 2006, and they never quite left her mind. "I kept thinking: How can I put together a book project that will honor these photographs?" she said. "I just thought about it off and on for years and years."

Finally, she recruited three other writers - Larry D. Thomas, Jack B. Bedell and Loueva Smith - to use Streck's images as inspiration. To create "Vanishing Points," each writer contributed 15 poems that correspond to specific photographs.

In black and white, the memorials appear stark and somber. Some are elaborately maintained with flowers and stuffed animals, written messages and unopened beer-bottle offerings. Others look faded and maybe forgotten. Streck found most of these memorials around Austin and San Antonio; the memorials feel universal, but sometimes the broad sky and desolate highway form a backdrop that feels purely, quintessentially Texan.

The poets didn't try to recount the true story behind each memorial. Instead, they used the photos as inspiration, offering up pieces of imagined lives and deaths. "When I looked at those photos, what came to me was to hear the voices associated with each photo," Cortez said. "It might be the voice of the person who was deceased, and it might be the voice of the person left behind."

In her section, Cortez offers portraits of a woman who used to love Jell-O shots, " 'specially the blue ones," and a lost brother who once grabbed an armadillo by its tail, then held it upside down "as it snarled and raked / air with black claws." All that specificity adds to the sense of grief and loss that threads through each poem.

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## MORE INFORMATION

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**'Vanishing Points'**

**Edited by Sarah Cortez**

**Texas Review Press, 160 pp., \$22.95**

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## TRANSLATOR

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## BOOKS

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"Really good poetry reaches into the universal through the particular," Cortez said. "It's this wonderful paradox."

On other pages, the writers survey the memorials with a poet's eye, sketching out the scene with rich description: "(S)tuffed toys / like plump saints of innocence with permanent smiles."

"See you soon, Brother" scrawled "by a magic marker on cold metal."

Three wooden crosses that "rise from a field of grass, / jarring as Golgotha."

In "Intersection," Bedell describes a cross placed at a crosswalk on an unremarkable street: "There is order here, and control, / except for the white cross / placed one day because there wasn't."

Each photo, we're reminded, represents a day when order and control turned suddenly into chaos; each honors a life that ended unexpectedly - and brutally - on a roadside or in a car. That makes "Vanishing Points" a sometimes wrenching read.

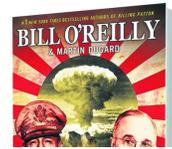
It's also a bit of a warning to take care. These crosses and small shrines, at intersections and on highways, memorialize people who thought they'd make it home. Cortez makes that clear in the poem "Sweep": "Presume you're not only safe / but lucky. Accelerate past / the small white crosses / under sensational Texas sky. / It'll never be you or yours / memorialized next to / the tree line's black lace."



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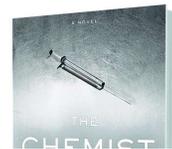
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