
[POETRY \(HTTPS://WOMENSVOICESFORCHANGE.ORG/CATEGORY/ARTS-CULTURE/POETRY\)](https://womensvoicesforchange.org/category/arts-culture/poetry)

**VANISHING POINTS: POEMS AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF TEXAS
ROADSIDE MEMORIALS: “SWEEP,” “ADAM,” AND “BRO”
(HTTPS://WOMENSVOICESFORCHANGE.ORG/VANISHING-
POINTS-POEMS-AND-PHOTOGRAPHS-OF-TEXAS-ROADSIDE-
MEMORIALS-SWEEP-ADAM-AND-BRO.HTM)**

BY [REBECCA FOUST \(HTTPS://WOMENSVOICESFORCHANGE.ORG/AUTHOR/RFOUST\)](https://womensvoicesforchange.org/author/rfoust)

July 30, 2017

[Start the conversation](#)

Page 2 of 2

Commentary by Rebecca Foust, Poetry Editor

I met Sarah Cortez at the 2016 West Chester Poetry Conference, the county’s oldest writing conference featuring formal and narrative poetry, held just outside of Philadelphia each June. This year I returned to teach the Sonnet Workshop and was pleased to be included on Cortez’s panel, “Casting a Wider Net,” about combining poems with visual imagery and was inspired by her experience of creating *Vanishing Points*. Texas Review press published my first two chapbooks, *Dark Card* and *Mom’s Canoe*, so I felt an affinity there, and Cortez’s project also reminded me of my collaboration with artist Lorna Stevens, *God, Seed: Poetry & Art about the Natural World* (Tebot Bach 2010).

The poems in *Vanishing Points* employ ekphrasis, the practice of making art inspired by other art when, for example, someone writes a poem in response to a painting, photograph, or sculpture. The word derives from the Greek words for “out of” (“ek-”) and “to describe or explain” (“phrazeo”). Perhaps the most famous example of ekphrasis is the shield of Achilles used in his duel with Hector, described in great detail in Book 18, lines 478-608 of Homer’s *Iliad*. Another is Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn.” Ekphrasis has been called the intersection of the visual and verbal arts, although writers have also been motivated by other art forms such as music and dance.

It can be a bit of a Russian-nesting-doll phenomenon. Here, the catalyst objects are bits of folk art—roadside memorials created by the friends and relatives of victims of car accidents on roads in Texas—that inspired Dan Streck’s remarkable photographs, which in their turn inspired the poems in the book. The photographs, all black and white, are evocative and haunting, each one paired by a piece by Loueva Smith, Jack B. Bedell, Sarah Cortez, or Larry D. Thomas. There are 60 poems-plus-images in all, fifteen contributed by each poet.

The sheer variety of roadside memorials is surprising—we see the expected simple wooden crosses, ribbons, and artificial flowers, but along with them come crosses stenciled with frogs (“Grenouille”) and guarded by angels (“Drecho”), beer bottles (“Clouds Live Forever”), pinwheels, (“New Instructions about Silence”) and dolls (“The Road to Nowhere”). Stuffed animals and toys make an appearance (“Consubstantial”), along with American flags (“A Sweet Liberty Between Them”), and at least one rodeo lariat (“Turbulence”). Some memorialize more than one victim, as in “Triptych,” “Unsevered,” and “Calvary.” Most crosses are made of wood, but one is forged in metal (“Bloomery”). Some shrines are wrapped in Christmas lights (“Lumina” and “Orpheus Speaks”); others are bedizened with glitter (“Glitter-Encrusted Dad”). Many bear love and goodbye notes or cautionary warnings like “Don’t Drink and Drive”

("Oscar"). One memorial consists simply of words carved deeply into the bark of a tree ("Oak Tree"). The photographs are beautifully shot and framed. Some shots pull in close while others, such as the one on the book's cover, pull back to emphasize the sweep of road, distance, and a future the deceased no longer has.

The poems are short, direct, accessible, and imagistic; each one is fitted to the page facing the image that inspired it. Some describe the shrine and others go further to imagine the life of the deceased or of those left behind. The poems featured today, "Sweep," "Adam," and "Bro," are typical of those in the book in being vivid, compressed, and in free verse. "Sweep" interests me because of its focus, not on the shrine that accompanies it, but on the road beyond and the experience of drivers who pass such shrines every day. "Adam" draws me for the way it uses the photo as a jumping off point into an imagination that conjures a host of unanswered and unanswerable questions. I love that it sees in a string of beads a necklace of bones "strung like dominos" that, like too many human lives, "find their meaning only in [the] collapse" that precedes "stacking in a lidded box." That last image reminds us, of course, of that last, lidded box that may someday hold our own bones. "Bro" is a narrative poem recalling a memory in which the deceased, for a few vivid and humorous lines, lives again.

The book is full of poems like these, and I find it fascinating to see how they both complete and expand beyond the photos and vice versa. You could think of it as a conversation happening between poem and photograph on facing pages. Reading the poems makes us see their accompanying photographs more clearly or at least differently, and seeing the photographs likewise enlarges our experience of reading the poems. Grief invites—indeed sometimes demands—a response, and sometimes, as in *Vanishing Points*, that response rises to the level of art that pays moving and powerful homage to those we have lost.

[Previous page \(https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm\)](https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm)

[1 \(https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm\)](https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm) [2](#)

[f \(https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&t=Vanishing Points: Poems and Photographs of Texas Roadside Memorials: "Sweep," "Adam," and "Bro"\)](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&t=Vanishing%20Points:%20Poems%20and%20Photographs%20of%20Texas%20Roadside%20Memorials:%20'Sweep,%20'Adam,%20'and%20'Bro')

[t \(https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?source=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&text=Vanishing Points: Poems and Photographs of Texas Roadside Memorials: "Sweep," "Adam," and "Bro":%20https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&via=womensvoices\)](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?source=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&text=Vanishing%20Points:%20Poems%20and%20Photographs%20of%20Texas%20Roadside%20Memorials:%20'Sweep,%20'Adam,%20'and%20'Bro':%20https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&via=womensvoices)

[G+ \(https://plus.google.com/share?url=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm\)](https://plus.google.com/share?url=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm)

[t \(http://www.tumblr.com/share?v=3&u=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&t=Vanishing Points: Poems and Photographs of Texas Roadside Memorials: "Sweep," "Adam," and "Bro"&s=\)](http://www.tumblr.com/share?v=3&u=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&t=Vanishing%20Points:%20Poems%20and%20Photographs%20of%20Texas%20Roadside%20Memorials:%20'Sweep,%20'Adam,%20'and%20'Bro'&s=)

[p \(http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&media=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Cortez-book-cover_7-13-17.jpg&description=Grief invites—indeed sometimes demands—a response, and sometimes, as in 'Vanishing Points,' that response rises to the level of art that pays moving and powerful homage to those we have lost.\)](http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&media=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Cortez-book-cover_7-13-17.jpg&description=Grief%20invites%20indeed%20sometimes%20demands%20a%20response,%20and%20sometimes,%20as%20in%20'Vanishing%20Points,%20' that response rises to the level of art that pays moving and powerful homage to those we have lost.)

[r \(http://www.reddit.com/submit?url=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&title=Vanishing Points: Poems and Photographs of Texas Roadside Memorials: "Sweep," "Adam," and "Bro"\)](http://www.reddit.com/submit?url=https://womensvoicesforchange.org/vanishing-points-poems-and-photographs-of-texas-roadside-memorials-sweep-adam-and-bro.htm&title=Vanishing%20Points:%20Poems%20and%20Photographs%20of%20Texas%20Roadside%20Memorials:%20'Sweep,%20'Adam,%20'and%20'Bro')