

AMA Journal of Ethics®

May 2018, Volume 20, Number 5: 501-506

IMAGES OF HEALING AND LEARNING

***Memento Mori* and Photographic Perspective of Roadside Trauma**

Artwork by David B. Nance, JD, and captions by David B. Nance, JD, Sara Scarlet, MD, and Elizabeth B. Dreesen, MD

Abstract

David Nance's photographs invite us to cross the liminal space between road and roadside and to consider the experience that trauma surgeons share with injured patients and the families of the injured and the dead. Just as trauma surgeons use the tools of science and surgery to make order out of the chaos of "the scene," so patients' families use art, found objects, and grief to transform anonymous roadsides into specific, personal remembrances. Bound together by the uncertainties of trauma, we can all stand at the side of the road bearing witness to both the inevitability and unpredictability of death.

Places of Rest

We are a highway nation, dotted by roadside memorials. Millions of us have seen these as we gaze out the windows of our whizzing automobiles. But how many of us have ever stopped for one? As part of his project, *Descansos: Roadside Memorials on the American Highway*, David Nance pulled off the road and photographed them as he travelled throughout the American Southwest. To Nance, these stark and moving tributes to people who died in motor vehicle collisions embody both the urgent simplicity of American folk art and the deep spiritual tradition of *Memento Mori*—reflections on and reminders of our transience and mortality.

Descansos mark sites where quiet roadsides were made suddenly chaotic. To trauma surgeons, these sites were once "the scene"—a term that tends to separate these spaces and what transpires therein from everyday life. When emergency medical services (EMS) personnel transport survivors from these scenes, they describe them using a standard narrative of mechanism, damage, injury, assessment, and initiation of treatment. As trauma surgeons hear the EMS report, we might see the scene in our mind's eye, but almost immediately we forget it as we move to resuscitate the injured person who lies in front of us and commands our full attention.

Families often ask us what happened at these scenes—what caused the collision, why one person survived when another didn't. Mostly we don't know. Although trauma surgeons tend to be sure and assertive when treating patients, we are most often

profoundly uncertain about exact events that led patients to require our care. Nance's *Descansos* images offer alternative depictions of these scenes.



Figure 1. Jim Roybal, Cecil Reagan. Photo: David Nance

Caption

US Hwy. 24, near Camp Hale, Eagle County, Colorado. People who experience trauma can experience powerful memories of their trauma long after an event has occurred. For passersby, roadside memorials can also provoke thoughts and feelings of trauma long after events have transpired.



© 2009 David B. Nance

Figure 2. John Kundinger, 12-31-73. Photo: David Nance

Caption

US Hwy. 91, on the descent from Fremont Pass, north of Leadville, Colorado. Leaning out from a steep grade and driven deep into the mountainside, this wooden cross appears to be fixed to the type of metal post that supports roadway signs. Constructing this memorial was likely to have been dangerous and difficult. Perhaps the painstaking act of creating this tribute and the risk taken to do so by its creators somehow symbolizes the magnitude of their loss.

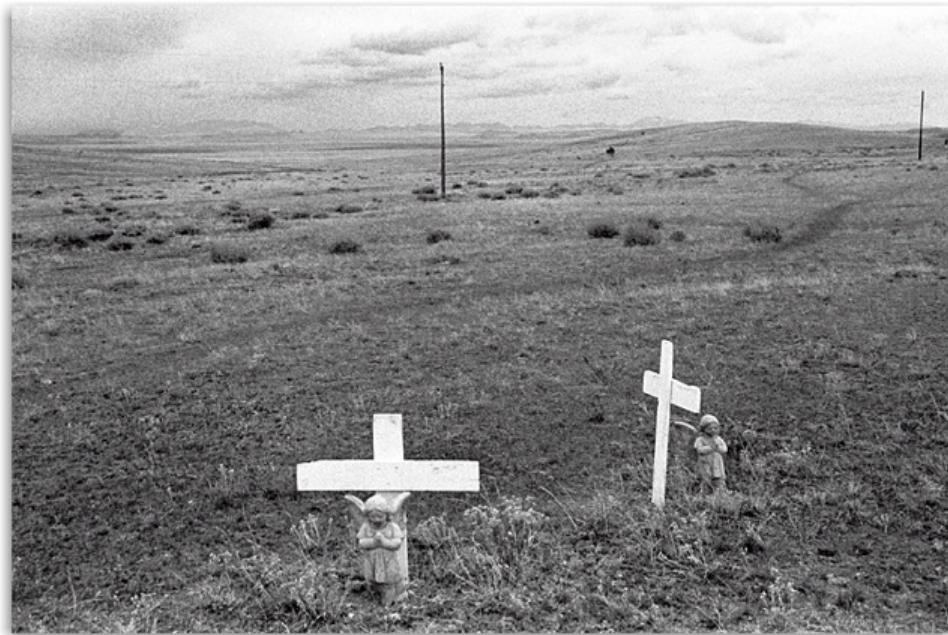


© 2009 David B. Nance

Figure 3. *nacio 8 29 75*. Photo: David Nance

Caption

US Hwy. 24, in Tennessee Park, north of Leadville, Colorado. Most roadside memorials bear names of the dead. The bereft go unmentioned, their presence subtler. To passersby, grievers remain anonymous. This memorial, however, appears to display names of those left behind.



© 2009 David B. Nance

Figure 4. Unmarked. Photo: David Nance

Caption

US Hwy. 285, south of Fairplay, in South Park, Park County, Colorado. Most memorials face the roads by which they stand. Nance found these two unmarked crosses to be unusual, one north facing and other looking to the south, both set against a barren landscape.

Missing Memorials

Our society often does not create permanent memorials or dedicate spaces to people who have experienced trauma as a result of interpersonal violence. How should we account for apparent differences in attitudes about how to memorialize motor vehicle trauma victims and victims of trauma resulting from interpersonal violence?

David B. Nance, JD, grew up in Urbana, Illinois and currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin. Educated at University of Wisconsin-Madison, he worked for many years for the Wisconsin Labor and Industry Review Commission in adjudication of employment law issues. Now retired, he continues to pursue photography as one of his avocations.

Sara Scarlet, MD, is a fifth-year general surgery resident and member of the hospital ethics committee at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is currently pursuing advanced training in surgical ethics at the MacLean Center for Clinical Medical Ethics at the University of Chicago. Her interests include moral distress among health care professionals, the ethics of correctional health care, and ethics education for surgeon trainees.

Elizabeth B. Dreesen, MD, is a trauma surgeon and the chief of the General and Acute Care Surgery Division of the Department of Surgery at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She completed her surgical residency at the New England Deaconess Hospital and a fellowship in trauma and critical care at the University of Maryland.

Related in the *AMA Journal of Ethics*

[Healing Hands](#), November 2017

[Out of Darkness, Light: Drawing and Painting by Margeaux Gray](#), January 2017

[We Got Your Back: Patient Advocacy Through Art](#), January 2016

The viewpoints expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the AMA.

**Copyright 2018 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
ISSN 2376-6980**