

The Devil's Highway: On the Road in the American West

William DeBuys

Joan Myers, Photographer

Briscoe Center for American History (Jul 19, 2022)

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The Devil's Highway combines Joan Myers's photographs with a gritty short story by William deBuys to evoke the sweeping, inhospitable open road.

Constructed in 1926, US Route 191, formerly known as Route 666 and nicknamed "The Devil's Highway," once ran from Utah to the Mexico border. Dozens of black-and-white images capture its desert scenery and derelict buildings. There are artifacts of the road, including abandoned cars, billboards, and statues. There are images of old-fashioned diners and Native American memorabilia. One memorable Texas composition blends nature with culture, with cacti in the foreground, and main street facades behind.

Myers remembers falling for this portion of the American West during her childhood summers in Colorado. But she's seen rural life deteriorate as small farms and stores failed, leaving ghost towns behind. Her work, now archived at the Briscoe Center for American History, preserves "a timeless moment of longing and despair."

In this repeat collaboration, "the journey is more personal and more elegiac." And in the accompanying story "Devil's Highway," a morality tale first published in 1992, George Cross, a government land manager, picks up two hitchhikers whom he soon realizes are illegal Mexican immigrants. Duty wrestles with empathy as he gets mired in the men's lives.

The story and images alike are as beautiful as they are bleak in *The Devil's Highway*.

REBECCA FOSTER (July / August 2022)

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