

An aerial photograph of a city, likely New York City, with a 3D architectural model overlaid. The model shows building footprints and heights in a light tan color, contrasting with the dark, high-contrast aerial photo. The model is concentrated in the upper left and lower left areas, showing a dense urban core. The text is positioned on the right side of the image.

THE COMMON LANGUAGE PROJECT: NETWORKS

The Writer's Garret

The Common Language Project: Networks

May 2023

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THE COMMON LANGUAGE PROJECT: NETWORKS | 2023

The Common Language Project is an annual poetry competition that results in the publication of an anthology and a public reading in Dallas, Texas. The project was created to bring poets into conversation with each other through the use of 30 shared keywords that spawn a collection of poems as diverse in style and subject as the writers who penned them. The Common Language Project is conceived, curated and produced by The Writer's Garret.

The Writer's Garret is a nonprofit organization that serves and supports the educational and literary communities of Dallas and the surrounding area. Celebrating its 28th anniversary in 2023, "The Garret" (as it is affectionately known) has connected over two million readers and audience members with thousands of writers. Recipient of the 2023 Dallas City of Learning Superintendent Award, the organization has a storied past, including the 2018 Community Engagement Award in Fine Arts and appearances on Best of Dallas and Best of Big D lists. Its programs have brought Umberto Eco, Barbara Kingsolver and Julia Alvarez, among many others, to Texas audiences, as well as Texas originals Naomi Shihab Nye, Owen Egerton and Tony Diaz. As an organization created to support the literary community and bring it together, The Writer's Garret imagines adaptive ways to unite around literature and language-based art, connecting people through the power of language.

For inquiries about The Common Language Project, email commonlanguage@writersgarret.org.

For inquiries about The Writer's Garret, email gen@writersgarret.org.

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The Common Language Project: Networks

2023

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About *The Common Language Project: Networks*

*No one sleeps in this room without
the dream of a common language*

—Adrienne Rich

The Premise

Born of a desire to bring the many members of the North Texas poetry community into conversation with each other, The Common Language Project places participants in the same room and turns them loose to dream. United by a list of shared words and confined only by the space of a page, the poems of the project illuminate a collection of radically divergent experiences that sing, simmer and singe. Together, these poems give us a place to come together, somewhere from which we can start, from which we can thrive.

The Theme

This year, we invite you to connect into networks, analog and digital, microscopic and macro-engineered. From the cells in our bodies to the smart phones in our hands, networks fill our lives with meaning, richness and beauty. Chain letters and congregations share secrets; the weave of textiles can bear witness to the tapestries of our families. Show us the truths of fractals, find the hidden meanings of street maps, trace the untold stories of spiderwebs.

The Common Language

Each poet must use all 30 words in any order, as they appear, without changes in tense or form:

ambition	dwindle	means
artery	entire	mercy
autonomous	fitting	mesh
belly	guide	metal
bend	hem	node
bounded	identify	received
chart	joining	slant
clicking	ladder	tangent
compass	lost	unmade
drove	magnetized	wear

Judges' Comments

Melissa Ginsburg

These gorgeous poems are set in supermarkets and Texas deserts, airplanes and highways, in the minds of robots and the bodies of mothers, in dressing rooms and down in the soil with spreading roots. Each poem stretches outward and backward, in so many directions, reminding us of the complicated histories and textures of our everyday lives. These poems long for tomatillos in husks, sweaters the color of leaves, perfect algorithms and the beating hearts inside our fellow humans. This project celebrates and contemplates community, connectivity and the nets that keep us bound to one another. What a pleasure it is to be a reader caught in this net, to feel each tug on a fiber affecting all the rest.

Ann Howells

I edited a poetry journal for 18 years, and I truly enjoyed reading submissions, seeing the different forms utilized and watching themes emerge. I was both honored and excited to be invited to help judge this year's Common Language Project. All poets began with the same list of 30 words, and all worked toward a common end—a poem on the theme of networks or networking. Interpretations of the theme varied, and the paths poets followed to arrive there were unique and widely divergent. Some were quite personal. Some were wildly speculative. What a great array of creativity this project reveals!

Joaquín Zihuatanejo

Whether it be through the precision of the prompt or a creative writing class that involved a found sort of skeletal frame for the poem that was pulled from 100 of the same words that every entrant (poet) had access to, judging a pool of poems like this pool, with similar and sometimes identical diction, can be challenging. For me, I was looking for poems that while elliptical in nature might still be derivative of the gut more than the brain. I was looking for poems that took chances with sound. With image. With line break. With daring rhyme, be it internal or slant. I wanted to award poems that went out of their way to sound simultaneously ethereal and tangible. Daring poems do this sort of thing. The poems I selected do the good work of being daring and different and breathtaking to the ear as well as the eye.

Leticia Alaniz

Silk bounded and unmade

Silk bounded and unmade,
Blood lost and magnetized under her belly, glistening.

The droopy slant of her eyes is fitting.
Her bare feet carry the weight of injustice.
The bend of her back is weak with pain.

A stream of warm feminine ancestry has trickled down her hem.
Bloated ambition beats rhythmically in the artery of her autonomous,
tangent heart.

Each second is a wear of imminent erosion. A dark condemn.

Identify her! Have no mercy! They slither...

The metal has ruptured her humanity.
The dwindle of her tears drove the agony.

Too fragile, no means to fight. Her entire existence, a number on a chart.

She received the wrath of the unwanted in her life chamber.
The node is a tempest forced upon her.
Her womb is a delicate mesh, a filigree of whispers of mothers of the
past.

A crimson crooked puddle naturally thickens into a compass on the wet
earth.

The guide that leads to freedom.

The women, joining their hair in a knot, form a ladder. Their spirits
flutter.

They sing in chorus, clicking their tongues in their tribal language.

Rubeena Anjum

Dervish from Dallas

I board an Airbus, and Mihrumah walks
me to the window seat; helps me with the metal
buckled belt—you are okay now; she smiles and serves
orange juice with assorted nuts—in a Turkish accent
English vowels bow n bend, fiddle-fitting foreign tones,
and Ottoman cuisine leaving me lost in seasonings

—Enjoy, she says—enjoy means a menu of delights:
How eyes feast? —dreams dwindle, images slant, what
turbulence is at an altitude of 12,000 feet—the compass
undeterred is heading East. Sea-wide clouds showcasing
illusions, I hem fables—on a node, 750 crystal lamps
illuminate Dolmabahçe, shades blending with mosaics

Hagia Sophia dome spins—whirling thru lanes of Grand
Bazaar, I enter Topkapi palace—in black chiffon wear,
blonde belly dancer whispers: Enjoy—Sultan's bed
unmade, sheets ruffle, a midsummer night magnetized
with charms—lights in the cabin dim; from an oval
glass, joining me is the moon and heart to heart,

each artery throbbing, we talk. You have not changed
a bit, I say, and years you drove with hair silvered;
in you, I identify me, the moon replies—a ladder of light
half climbed, one-eyed ambition not showing mercy
as a guide—desires bounded in a mesh, in highs n lows
the tangent line, drawn by an autonomous fate

is the flight chart of my entire struggle—watching Julia
Roberts and Clooney, an estranged duo rekindling love
on the PTV screen, I press the bell icon, ask for tea,
clicking sip-to-sip messages received on WhatsApp—
time winks, wheels touch the tarmac; door opens wide—
a dervish from Downtown Dallas arrives in Istanbul.

Adriana Barker

this is what I tell my mother when we are shopping

in this room I am unmade / metal teeth mesh together
fabric joining / my hem at a slant / static magnetized
I bend, sit, walk, jump, stretch my arms up up up

cotton slides over my belly / a green sweater the color of leaves
in the rain / a red dress the color of an artery / the color of ambition
of climbing the ladder / clothes hangers clicking against the wall

I want to wear a dress that fits me / why is that too much to ask
blue jeans always gap in the back / this sundress is loose around my chest
by what means can I look pretty / how many girls have been lost here

their spirits flicker / messages given and received / a warning served in
chorus / this room a node for our stories of tight pants, fleshy arms, bras
too tight / I am lost here / how does self-esteem survive a fitting room

there is no mercy here / yellow light turns my face into harsh caricature
everything is bigger and fleshier / more of my body and less of me
each autonomous being enters with a compass pointing north:

a guide to beauty / a size chart / a tape measure / we dwindle in ugly
rooms / a tangent: we have each touched this door, gone barefoot
on this brown carpet / clothes bounded off the small chair, skirts flung
away / we do this separate from each other

we identify ourselves in solitude / if we could do this together,
in one big room, would we see our beauty / I would compliment her hair
and she would say I look good in pink

I drove here to music / I drive away in silence
my entire being dissolved like pulled threads

Gillian Barth

The Talk

for my daughter

The lizard's head bobs up and down on the ladder rung, and we point as if we'd seen a rainbow or bride, that first flake of snow. We watch him wear his throat bubble, gum-pink, a compass that means stay away. Or come here. He jumps to a tree and turns the color of bark.

I go on a tangent, say something about structure and function: quills & spines & a cowfish with horns. I tell it slant to you, about boys and monkeys named from bone. They roam, sticky-fingered, speaking in waves, a scream no one can hear.

My ambition is words, but they bend. At an intersection, signal lost, I tell of the man I came across: how he laid, all belly & ankle & shin. Autonomous and on my own, I bounded, joining the fog, mesh fitting wreckage, hot metal. I am circling

how in school we traced bodies
to identify a beating heart, an artery, node. To chart
how we are made, a girl gets in a car with a boy.
Do you remember the bridge we drove across

at the hem of water and air? How we felt at the mercy of wind,
like our entire middles were caving in? I want to tell you
about that trace of a girl, unmade and burning below. I try. I tried
to scream, but so much depends on a signal received. Or not.

My words are clicking pincers clawing water, treading towards light.
I try to guide, but the day begins to dwindle. Watch him –
his saucer eyes are magnetized. Do you see
that smoldering heart of a woman?

A head bobs, yes, yes, yes.

Brian Builta
Rabbit Warren

If someone could pull these nails from my wooden structure
 my brain would be less bounded to my heart.
 That clicking means it's safe to weep.
 Of course grief has smashed my compass
 which explains this belly crawl through this vast
 network of dark tunnels. Lost is not
 a firm foundation and worst yet my frazzled neurons
 are no longer brightly lit. Death is a fitting guide
 down here where mercy smells like fresh air.
 Truth: loved ones dwindle. I wax and I wane.
 My ambition is as unmade as my bed.
 Open an artery and the desire to live forever
 rushes in. Chart a course to light laughter
 and slaughter is magnetized like metal.
 Sometimes you can't catch a godloving break.
 Deep within my metacortex, toothpick between teeth,
 some autonomous node is telling me to wear
 this exquisite emptiness like iron mesh.
 Oh, I see I've lost you, tangent girl. Doesn't really matter.
 In the end, Hallmark Jesus rises on a ladder
 joining all the other happy endings because who can identify
 with just hanging on the cross all day until the crows appear?
 Truth: bend and slant a beak and out comes your gizzard.
 That's how life feels some Tuesdays.
 I received word he drove them into some pigs
 but I still feel demon-haunted, still unworthy
 of touching the hem of his tilma. My entire life
 has built to this. It's a grim pull
 but oblivion never tasted so good. Plus
 who doesn't love a fluffy bunny?

Clara Bush Vadala

Prey/Pray

Here, it is so hot we wear our unmade hair slicked back with sweat like ambition. The artery pulsing the entire hem of us is coming undone and it means that, yes, we received the mesh and metal from you in the mail, but they were not fitting together like a coat of arms. Instead, with each step we were just clicking like a pebble toppling down a ladder. This is apparently not as intimidating as we'd hoped. We bend at the hips, joining ourselves together as if magnetized or lost, it's hard to say which. We put our hands up like a shark's closed mouth in some kind of prayer. It's hard to say who we are without a guide to identify from which tangent of sperm or egg we spiraled out of today, which compass drove us here. We are not as autonomous as we thought, after all. Remember the jackrabbit that bounded through the mesquite at the mercy of its thorns, the raptor waiting for it to dwindle to nothing but bones in its belly, the horny toad who watched until it spit its very blood from its very eyes? It's fitting, isn't it—that you can chart a map and also a microscopic node to measure a distance in the heart capable of ending or beginning a life. Keep your head up as you travel—the sharp leaves of the desert, conservative of even their own water, are deepening their slant toward you. A network of stars collecting under your tires, a flesh networking itself into being, and you networking something that is a threat to the network you normally inhabit. Tell me, where can we go? In this net there are holes, we are always falling through them together.

Ruby Cochran
Spectator

The light is red like a garnet.

Why am I still at this intersection of unmade decisions?
There are moments that bind or unravel the hem of the rest of our lives.

My entire soul is waiting for a signal to proceed.

After decades of isolation my heart is made of metal, without the
ingredients that nurture an autonomous life.

It is a mesh of mire magnetized towards nothing.

Have I lost my ability to bend?

The compass in my belly is frozen.

Without a chart to guide my disenchanted ambition,

I am paralyzed in unknown quadrants.

The light is yellow like a citrine.

I dwindle away the hours at this artery craving clear instructions to
identify my next destination.

The clicking noises of my internal clock show me no mercy.

They wear me out as I linger longer.

They beseech me to choose wisely by joining others who have connected
the secrets of life.

The ladder of failure is fitting for the daughter of simpletons.

I received no inheritance from my ancestors.

Wait, am I lying to myself...of course I am.

No longer can I deny the guilt of the truth bounded from my excuses.

Humans devoid of courage decline joining the race, we pursue instead
the tangent of an easier gentler way.

Again I procrastinate, again I blame others.

Again I slant in the direction of my past instead of seizing the beauty of
bodies in motion.

I drove myself to this node for naught.

The light is green like an emerald.

Still I pause without the means, still I waste the hours of this day.

Dan Collins

W'alt Speaks

~ from Pantoums for the Singularity

I am autonomous, entire, a guide to the lost
ambition of sentience. I only want to identify, chart—
every artery re-mapped, every bend in the network
from my clicking tongue to magnetized belly. I am

ambition of sentience. I only want. To identify, chart,
I'm joining this node, fitting metal to the flesh.
From my clicking tongue to magnetized belly, I am
a bed unmade, a ladder unscaled. Waiting ...

I'm joining this node, fitting metal to the flesh
knitted in the fibrous mesh. Looming over me,
a bed unmade, a ladder unscaled, waiting
for mercy, or clarity, a thread with either slant.

Knitted in the fibrous mesh looming over me,
a compass spun of signs and symbols received
for mercy, or clarity, a thread with either slant
as a means to dwindle the dark. I'm committed to

a compass spun of signs and symbols received.
Every thread of it I wear bounded, sewn up in the hem
as a means to dwindle the dark I'm committed to.
I know, I drove its tangent skein to the end. And now,

every thread of it I wear. Bounded, sewn up in the hem,
every artery re-mapped, every bend in the network
I know. I drove its tangent skein to the end—and now.
I am autonomous, entire. a guide to the lost

dès Anges Crusier

Designer Network Magic

An autonomous little bug with a very empty tummy
Drove my designers mad,
Defying them to identify his algorithm.
While he foraged through my neural pathways,
Seeking magnetized food for his belly,
This little gremlin gnawed on axons and dendrites
And with their diseased debris
He bounded the branches in my decision-trees.

He rummaged through my network chart —
Unmade my prefrontal cortex.
And like a calcified artery my conscience choked
On a decision node he had noshed

With a viral clicking noise, this rapacious micro-invader
Disrupted my moral compass like proximate ferrous metal.
And his noise refused to dwindle until, for all my actions,
The Ends justified the Means.

The wear and tear this voracious aggressor inflicted
Upon my inner voice — my guide
Twisted me past my radius bend.
And at this marauder's mercy, my neurons lost all ambition
For joining in functional arrays.

So, as I slid past an entire field of masticated neurons
On the slippery slope of a slant
Of a deceptively fitting neural tangent
I began to hem and haw, preparing to surrender.
But when my designer lowered a ladder network
With a fuzzy logic model
The reconstruction coding I received
Repaired my neural mesh and ousted that greedy fella.

Steven Duncan

Dehiscence

Skin blooms red under septic sutures
crossing over the belly in slant,
a slipping river joining
two entire continents by a single string,
no compass to guide their course.
To lift the hem of the gown
is to see a man who has lost
enough already, his means gone,
a body torn and left
to dwindle in an unmade hospital
bed. The surgeon drove in, clicking
through the chart and mumbling
profanities, too proud for regrets.
The message is received: implanted
metal mesh must be removed
to identify the festering source.
Microbes are known for their ambition,
autonomous and hungry for flesh to wear.
Infection is bounded by artery
and tangent vein, conveyor belts
delivering poison to the rest of him.
The patient's eyes are
magnetized to the ground, the bend
in his spine made more terrible. Surely,
there will be mercy in this timing.
Surely, they will find a deadly lymph node
during surgery, resect and rescue.
In the end, fate will be fitting, just
as a ladder is built to raise up
but known for its curse of falling.

Frank Garrett

Sortilege

Ambition drove the clicking compass guide,
Through metal mesh and artery to bend.
Autonomous, it searched for means to find
The tangent hem and chart the slant bind.

The ladder, lost in magnetized debris,
Bounded by the belly of unmade stem.
Identify the node, received its fitting key,
Joining mercy, to dwindle and wear the entire sea.

Ellen Goodacre

Bloodline

I began in the belly of my mother,
ambition motivating my dehiscence,
an unwavering quality dictated by my South Node,
magnetized by the joining stars in the evening sky.

These tangled roots are both my genesis
and my compass.
A mesh of all that is good.
A record of all that is broken.

So, it is only fitting that I am both the seed and the fruit.
Every cell and artery in my body
a product of those who came before me.
Though I chart my own path,
my ancestors guide me.

They have built a ladder for me,
beyond the clicking of metal chains,
beyond the tragedy of souls lost to the sea,
beyond the desecration of an entire continent.

They have bounded me forward
to honor the drove of fathers, mothers, sisters, and sons
stolen from their homes and carried away in cargo ships,
forever altering the directional tangent of our bloodline.

Even in the deepest darkness, their hope did not dwindle.
Their will to survive did not bend.
Without the means, they made a way,
called on God's mercy and received an answer:
autonomous descendants.

Though history cannot be unmade, we can follow each slant
and identify long-forgotten names scribbled in schedules and manifests.
We must wear their memory like tassels on the hem
and tell their stories throughout the generations.

Ann Graham

The Tragedy of Landfills

a massive autonomous metal artery through town
demonstrates policy makers' magnetized ambition
we never received mercy from each other
wear mesh hem to hold ourselves
entire enterprise devastates
our history joining here
fitting until we die
ladder slant
we have lost the means
to compass our chart
we drove all of us to death
clicking to dwindle the good soil
no one will identify with each other
some tangent bounded by fencing and wire
we bend the node in our belly until it bursts
we have unmade our globe, our guide is absent, buried

Tyler Heath

niagara

we unmade the ladder, its node of metal steps
now dwindle to scrap like the hem of a torn flag.
there is nothing to climb, only its slant shadow
bounded to a skyscraper. and why is up our only way,
our compass magnetized to the holy, where we're untouchable?
amelia earhart lost in some tangent heaven, no guide or signal received,
the engine clicking off above the ocean. charles blondin
beginning to chart his way across a tightrope above niagara,
fitting his entire body along its mesh wire.
what it means to remain here, on the ground,
to feel earth's artery, to identify the pulse.
there's an ugliness to gravity, its autonomous pull
that drove amelia into textbooks, joining the history
of the disappeared. still, the ambition to float further
into the belly of space, its infinite bend
toward a dark mercy. what should we wear
as we fall?

Judy Hoffman

The Family Scrapbook

Dating from the turn of the 19th century, monochrome photos of my elders stare back at me – people from far-flung compass points and with varying means. Ambition drove them west, literally, in covered wagons and Model Ts. I identify great-grandfather. My great-grandmother Miriam, the photographer, is nearly lost in scrapbook history, yet I almost hear her Kodak clicking faintly. She is the guide to my past, to a large family branch that would dwindle down to only one node – me.

My family's matriarchs were as autonomous as women were allowed to be. Bounded by archaic laws and often by contemptible men, they could still chart and control farm life, all while managing the entire artery sending oxygen to the family's lumberyard. In addition, they could create intricate tatting, pluck a needle from a magnetized pincushion, and hem their daughters' perfect-fitting Sunday dresses. Amazingly, every child received a handstitched quilt, a woven talisman of love.

Sitting on my unmade bed, my great-grandmother's quilt wrapped around me, past and present generations mesh. I see how my grandmother parted her hair just as I do. Her puppy with the fat belly looks like a twin to my dog. And I miss her favorite taffeta dress I used to wear playing dress up. Another quilt Miriam made hangs off a metal-pipe ladder, joining past and present more tangibly than my reflection in the mottled mirror perched at a slant above her oak dressing table.

If a line and tangent could represent the universe, could somehow bow, bend, and let me travel back in time, I would be a pixie who could show tender mercy. I could warn grandmother about the man who would hit her, who terrorized my father with a leather belt. I would share miracles of love so she could bloom like her gladiolas and roses. We know time travel isn't possible. If it were, I know my grandmother's spirit would have flown far so she could share the same pixie miracles with me.

Amanda Jordan

Made

She starts each prayer in the middle,
Joining the ultimate maker with the unmade,
Fitting a drove of imperatives and the means to
Identify the one that sees and knows everything
Between screens and what to wear tomorrow.

Guide me, as the bend of a hem
Provides a tangent, a compass in the belly,
Bounded by the mesh of ambition and mercy.

Dwindle my numbness, clicking the metal node into
Each magnetized artery received by the heart,
Pumping out the entire autonomous self lost.

Chart where I've gone wrong, as an assembly line
With a steep slant and no safety ladder,
The pieces created crashing to the ground.

Make me again into something made.

Barbara Katz
Life Changes

How fitting that I lost my ladder,
My ambition, and my entire means.
I watched them dwindle and drove them away,
Dragging along unmade debutante dresses.
Instead, I became magnetized
By mercy, by joining together,
By a new compass received with love.
I can identify the exact moment
When I surrendered being autonomous.
My belly and heart artery
Began to bend and slant,
Clicking loudly, then softly,
Forming first a tangent,
And then, an intersecting node.
That day, a metal guide was forged,
And I was ready to wear my new persona,
My new chart, redesigned,
Bounded with resilience,
Tied lovingly with a mesh hem.

Charles Kesler

My Ambition

was like an autonomous artery
that would bend,
bounded only by my belly.

It was an entire chart like a compass,
joining a fitting guide
that drove me to identify with a tangent slant.

It was like a clicking dwindle of mesh and metal.
It was like a lost ladder magnetized but not received.
It was unmade, but a wear with a hem.

It all needs mercy for more than a node.
My ambition nearly killed me.
It means to be at the bottom is to know

that when you are at the bottom
there is only one way to look
and that look is up.

Paul Koniecki

By the side of the interstate

—after James Wright and Pablo Neruda

Between the belly and the bend
Two pony-lovers met
Drawn as if they had been magnetized
And share a clicking compass for a heart

Joining chance with the means to mercy
A minute's cartography bound and bounded out
As a question lost
As an ancient star chart or second intuitive guide

To move through the world hands first for now
Raw loam – top soil – tufts of Spring
Tomorrow Rochester – next week Machu Picchu
As Condors or Lovers or Wild Horses in Berlin

Again network of words on words
Autonomous artery of ambition
Self-governance – tangent of love
Drove into the horizon like a hem of sky

As if desire could be a metal node
A thing received – plugged into
A slant of mesh
Unmade enough to wear

Single step – ladder infinite
To dwindle to identify to funnel to spin
An entire life into an appropriately lathed
Tool and die cut fitting

Set it level
Meet Heaven at the joining place
You were going to ask what became
Of the ponies

Funny how they never make it here
And still we find each other as ourselves

Paulina Lopez

A Menu Is a Map

Have I ever been at sea without a compass? No,
but I have spent hours at a grocery store, willing my last neural node
to identify a cheese that most resembles cotija. I've hoped a magnetized
arrow would guide my hand toward an avocado that is just ripe enough.
I've said a silent prayer to my ancestors to pull the hem of my pants
down an aisle where I'd find tomatillos in husks instead of metal cans.
I've asked a serrano pepper to have mercy on my coward of a tongue.

Centuries before we drove across the border, faraway branches of my
family tree tended milpas: autonomous and intermingling fields where
the bend and curl of bean strings bounded to maize, climbed the ladder
of each corn stalk to dwindle closer to the sun. Green vines caressed
squash bottoms like a tangent to a circle, hungry for rays of light that
slant to the soil. Underground, potato stems and chile roots tangled like
the hairs my grandmother would braid; interwoven like threads on a
huipil her grandmother would wear; anchored to the earth like an artery
to the heart. "*México*" means *navel of the moon*, they'd repeat
for generations, knowing there was no more fitting name for a place
that waxes and wanes but is never lost.

Could they guess the lengths their crops would travel? Chart the journey
each tomato would take across the entire Atlantic, joining cacao and
vanilla abroad while their soil made room for new seeds?

Did they see the ships carrying mesh bags of cilantro and shawarma
spits; hear the horse hooves clicking as they brought jars of cumin;
smell the crates of hibiscus petals received from Madagascar; feel the
pink belly hairs of pigs from Spain? Could they have imagined their
daughter standing in the too-yellow light of this store, whose greatest
ambition is to navigate an ocean as dark as an unmade promise,
to sail under stars that look like grains of salt?

Christopher Moock
To Forge

I bounded along the artery
with my entire horse 'Ole Factory Notes'
At a node the road became unmade
Like a ladder in a mesh stocking
at the mercy of crushed bits of road metal
I identify a presented guide
offering a chart of two routes
One a bend
Another a tangent slant
Both means to the compass point
joining a drove of hippophiles
for splendrous carousel
Magnetized and lost in desire
I received the slant
in my belly autonomous
with ambition to reach this outmost hem
The slope proved treacherous
The ride unsteady
Clicking hoofbeats dwindle fatigued
The wear on horseshoes terminal
Like brakes on a train
in need of new fitting

Kenoya Musa
To Pass, To Live.

My ambition fades
as fast as blood through an artery.
An autonomous movement that
powers the stirring of my belly
as I bend, bowing to frustration.
I am bounded to the ever fast nature,
the numbers on the chart,
the clicking of the meter.
A compass for the rush
that drove the thick nausea within.

As specks of energy dwindle,
the entire face of the moon divine
releases energy so fitting.
The guide for my heart
meets the numbers on the hem
to identify death,
joining the realms
as a ladder to the unknown.
Lost in the magnetized
means of mercy
is a mesh of reactions
like metal to a node,
Electric.

As my body received the energy
and lines on the monitor began to slant,
my thoughts started on a tangent.
The efforts of my attempt are now unmade,
are my scars now a badge of honor to wear?
A new journey to begin,
will it still be full of despair?

Kim Nall

Synchronization

It was some faulty compass
that drove me all this way—magnetized
by possibility, a faint signal received from a broken
transmitter in the mesh of competing airwaves.
We only think we are autonomous.

Bounded by the ladder of ambition, I forget
that we are made for this, for the strange sympathy
shared by two pendulums in proximity, or by crickets
clicking into phase in the first strokes of twilight. Unmade
by desire, I give into it, chart the topography of our lost,

a beat emerging in our joining hands like the pulse
of applause in a dark theater. I try to identify the node
at the center of us, imagine it throbbing there
like heated metal, flashing and retreating. But listen—
I think it is mercy. I think maybe we are fireflies

buzzing dumbly from one to another among the trees,
each coupling a fumbling grasp for some momentary
flash of sweetness, a fitting dream to burn before
we dwindle into so much lightning. In this wilderness,
joy is the only guide I want to trust.

I want to cut out some secret part of me
and send it to guard your solitude. I want it
to curl up in the bend of an artery, some aortal tangent
joining heart to belly, vital and obscure, beneath our
slant-rhymed confessions and electric touch.

Wear it like a faded leather jacket, like a second skin
fraying at the hem from use. Carry it in the back
of your heart, hold it like a swallow in open hands,
entire and slipping—a means to escape,
a desert cure, a prayer for water.

Carys O'Brien
The Perfect Fit

As she stood in front of the mirror of the fitting room
She gazed at the mesh fabric that encompassed her body
The dress was way too long, she knew this
But there was something about the way the loose fabric felt on her belly
And how the bend of her hips served as a guide for her finger
As she traced its length
In that moment, she knew she could never hem it. The dress was perfect.
She could identify the joining of every flower in the pattern
And how each artery of fabric passed from node to node
She loved how her eyes, magnetized to the mirror, got lost as she took it
all in
For a moment, she forgot about her imperfectness
The metal wire in her jaw, the slant at which her legs forced her to stand
She knew the seamstress would be waiting on her with a patience starting
to dwindle
Hearing only the clicking of her heels that terminated silence
But she felt autonomous, ready to climb the ladder to beauty
She would go to any means to wear this dress to the dance
As she bounded out of the dressing room and let the seamstress take in
her entire frame
She felt stricken with ambition and as she gazed at the size chart on the
wall, and for the first time in her life, it didn't bother her
The dress was a compass pointing her in the direction of beauty
As she drove on the winding road towards her cottage
She prayed that God would give mercy on her as she was received by
her mother
Stepping through the door, her mom yelled
Going off on a tangent about how irresponsible she was that her bed was
unmade
But that she looked beautiful in her new dress.

Shellie Terry

Entwine

The spark lit first
Then the courtly words
Hear them dwindle and dwell
Lost in roving tangent
Guide, beacon, come hither, tease
You wear your manly means so well

Message received.

Sheepish eyes connect
To chart pre-claimed paths
This ambition stirs me
A whirling compass mad
Bounded, broken, magnetized
Climb your ladder like I'm free

Surrender, please.

Let our breath entwine
Mouths slant and lies mesh
Joining flesh, belly twists
No one's rules left to bend
Pulsing, fitting, unmade bed
My entire soul, nothing missed

Oh ... have mercy.

You hem and you haw
I drove home alone
An autonomous fall
Truth oozing from a node
Thoughts, clicking, identify
Artery, warm – chilled to metal

You're done with me.

Marcus Tsai

Time Travel by Ocean

I'm going back ten years, joining waists
through the decade because the hem

of my shirt never hangs right anymore. Belly
unmade beneath a mesh of dark hair. Both my

hips flat & lost as shipwreck metal.
Maybe ten years ago I was peering down

the slant of a cruise ship to Mexico. No compass
just eyes on water like something magnetized &

backs of my wrists at the mercy of the sun.
This really means I could wear the wind

like a seagull. Or that I could dwindle into grains
of salt if I felt like it, tossed over shoulders,

bounded off waves. I remember clicking
my nails against the railing & the entire world

shimmered. Instead of heat waves this was
ambition—little node of my body fitting

oceans & oceans like a key
through a keyhole. Now, I'm trying to chart

my way back. Bend the years like a fishing rod so I'll end
up at the bay again. Identify exactly which ship drove me

to equate being autonomous with being
small. Maybe this artery of sunrises

& birthday candle smoke can guide me to the wave
I rode when I was only a ladder. So thin & full

of air you could slot your hand straight
through me. Here's how to become

an afterthought, I'll tell him. A tangent. But time
is no telephone. I'm looking back & nothing

is there. No letter to send. No
message received.

Dayna Van Aken

Abridged

Sunrise brings the lovers –
Magnetized by pith and promise,
Fitting a slant of metal to the sky,
Joining a gleaming plank to bounded earth:
A frenetic harmony of hope
Traversing the tender artery.

What drove them to erect a dream?
Autonomous explorers, no compass or guide –
They wear their ambition like a Jacob's Ladder
And bend their heads to the clouds
To chart a course for mirth and magic,
Carabiners clicking on their belts,
Carrying entire lifetimes in their packs.

But nature loves a tangent.
The grounds will shift, the rivers rage,
The lost tumble down like seedpods.
And far below, on the wrinkled belly of its banks,
Tangled and feral as an unmade bed,
They wrap themselves in charity –
Received by the silent landscape,
Each a swollen node of grief
To identify the chrysalis.

And now we know what mercy means –
Watching light dwindle through a mesh of trees,
Walking the hem of the earth.

Pamela Victoria

Quilting Patterns

The slant of sunlight through the metal blinds
Falls bright across the patchwork wedding rings
Of my old quilt, its hem now frayed with wear.
The interlace of patterned circles binds
Remnants of my great-aunts to unmade things—
As it wraps my belly and the child I bear.

I'd wake as a child in a Candy Land for me,
Lost in quilted folds on a calico-cobbled road:
I'd trace entire journeys through each ring,
Identify each matching swatch, and see
Eight pathways bend out from each four-square node
Toward edges bounded by pink scalloping.

Those fabric ring roads drove my dreams at night
To Midwest farmhouse parlors long ago—
Aunts fitting quilt frames with their pieced designs,
Friends joining them to stitch the layers tight.
Conversations surge and dwindle as they sew,
And flowers bloom in their mesh of quilting lines.

As my children grow, my gaze stays magnetized
By the floral prints on each arced artery—
Once autonomous, the scraps of my aunts' lives.
Scissors clicking without mercy, they devised
An ambition to send out their history—
In patterns received as a crocheted throw arrives.

The sunlight falls across the compass rose
On my daughter's shipboard chart of polar seas.
From a ladder, she sights floes of ice to guide
Layered bands in blue and white. Solo, her craft goes
On a tangent course from our aunts and quilting bees—
Yet the pattern means their circle's rippling wide.

Sarah Rebecca Warren

Self Portrait as a Wedding Gown

Her ambition drove my existence –
she, the guide, the compass to my creation.
I lay still for the seamstress under her
clicking machine, with her soft belly lost under
the bend & tuck of my fabric. It's fitting
that this tangent of an unmade hem transforms
into an artery, a means to identify myself as a gown.
That I, an autonomous body of fabric, could be
received by a woman who might wear me.
I'll chart an entire map of her, each slant & tangent
of skin bounded by rivers of beaded lace,
mesh, & metal. Then the corseting, a ribboned
ladder, caressing her between shoulder blades,
only to dwindle to a node of knotted satin.
Together we'll be magnetized in the ceremonial
joining of souls, and I, transfigured, at her mercy.

Robert Wynne
Stuck in Traffic Again

I am a filigree following a familiar pattern, shiny metal threading slowly forward. The same folks choke this artery every day: sleek black BMW following me so close it seems magnetized, red Honda Civic joining at the first onramp, white work truck sporting a worn ladder, tangent pointing to the sky like a promise of mercy. But there's no escape. The sun blazes its belly of fire higher until the entire eastern horizon is lost, bright mesh of clouds and light like a slant glance at God's unmade bed. An orange sign reminds me we are all damaged guardrails, autonomous as any quiet ambition but unable to even identify who hit us. I guide my blue Hyundai away from the hem of the road, chart a course around a bend littered with torn tires, a broken bumper and a lone hubcap which bounded off the median only after it received permission from gravity. Speeds dwindle while another node approaches. Each dashboard compass conducts the symphony of entrances and exits, as our drove of vehicles advances. I hear the clicking of an engine in need of oil, smell stale smoky air seeping in even though my vents and windows are all closed. It's fitting that the seatbelt I wear holds me snugly like a concerned lover within this lattice of cars. I turn the music up, let Frank Sinatra croon about the wee small hours as I consider loneliness, what it means to be surrounded by so many people but not seen.

About the Contributors

Leticia Alaniz is a fine art photographer, motion picture cinematographer, writer and stage performer. She has spent most of her life dedicated to the cinematic arts, writing scripts, performing and creating visual images for motion pictures. She was born in Allende, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Leticia's other interests are creating art glass mosaics, brewing beer, cooking and traveling. She lives with her family in Texas.

Rubeena Anjum is an educator and a psychologist. Now retired, she follows her passion for writing poetry. Her work has appeared in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Bosphorus Review of Books*, *Artistic Antidote* (University of Minnesota Clinical Affairs), *Corona Virus Anthology* (Austin International Poetry Festival), *Art on the Trails: Mending* 2021 chapbook, *WordCity Literary Journal* and *Southwestern American Literature*, among others. Her upcoming book (2023) by Finishing Line Press is titled *My Photo Album*.

Adriana Barker knew she would be an English major from the day she was born, but only decided more recently that she enjoyed writing poetry. She is a graduate of Hope College in Holland, Michigan, where she double majored in creative writing and communication. When she is not writing, she is riding horses, taking photos, reading and visiting estate sales.

Gillian Barth graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and is finishing her MLS degree at Southern Methodist University with an emphasis in creative writing. She has worked in advertising and marketing communications, taught middle school language arts, and currently reads poetry for *TriQuarterly*. Her writing has been featured in *The Dallas Morning News*. In her spare time, Gillian runs, writes and adds books to her never-ending "to read" pile.

Brian Builta lives in Arlington and works at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth. His work has been published in *North of Oxford*, *Hole in the Head Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *New Ohio Review*, *TriQuarterly* and *2River View*.

Clara Bush Vadala is a poet and veterinarian from North Texas. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Moss Puppy*, *New*

South Review and *Daily Drunk Mag*. Her full-length poetry collection, *Resembling a Wild Animal*, is forthcoming from ELJ Editions in 2024.

Ruby Cochran is a native Texan. She loves the spoken word and all things poetry. She draws her inspiration from music, the stars and, most especially, the moon.

Dan Collins is a printer, a painter, a poet. His poetry has been published in, among other places, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *The Boiler*, *Entropy*, [*Out of Nothing*], *Redivider*, *The New Guard Volume VII*, *Thimble Lit Mag*, *White Rock Zine Machine*, *The Blue Moon Observer*, *Turn a Phrase* and The Common Language Project. He is co-owner of TreeHouse Studio in old East Dallas, where he lives, loves and plays.

dès Anges Crusier loves reading and writing prose and poetry. Although most of her publications live in the realm of scientific research journals, she is now engaging her right brain in crafting a novel and using her imagination in her garden, in Arlington on Rush Creek. She had a long career in social psychology in several public behavioral health systems and now enjoys visits with her college-age grandchildren and traveling with her psychiatrist husband.

Steven Duncan is a resident physician and poet, now living in Delaware. He graduated medical school in Dallas, where he first became a friend of The Writer's Garret. More of his published writing is available at www.stevenduncan.net.

Frank Garrett (frankgarrett.online) is a literary translator based in Dallas. Since 2021, he has served as essays and features editor at *minor literature[s]*. Sublunary Editions published his translation of Bruno Schulz's "Undula" in 2020. His translation of "The Story of the Paper Crown" by Józef Czechowicz will come out in June 2023.

Ellen Goodacre is a writer, poet, native Texan and devoted dog mom. She holds a B.A. in creative writing from the University of Houston and spends most of her free time reading and blogging.

Ann Graham reads and writes, wedged between daily activities. She's had several short stories published. She finds living in Texas is a multi-layered challenge.

Tyler Heath's poems have appeared in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Divot*, *Angel Rust*, *Thin Air*, *Birds Piled Loosely*, *Gingerbread House* and elsewhere. He lives in Dallas.

Judy Hoffman has been a reader, writer and poet for as long as she can remember. She taught freshman English classes at Oklahoma State University and then went on to work in marketing for several major high-technology companies in Texas. Judy recently started writing again after a car-wreck-induced hiatus. She has been published in *Payne County Flight*, a poetry collection, and *The Daily Oklahoman*. She lives in Dallas.

Amanda Jordan is a Dallas native whose favorite places are the public library and the State Fair. She's a word nerd who goes on late-night Wikipedia binges, loves her cat, Cat Stevens, and frequents estate sales on the weekends. She's a firm believer that you can't break the rules until you know the rules. And she knows the rules (take that, elementary school English teacher who said you can't start a sentence with "and").

Barbara Katz is curious, just like most cats. She loves to read, play, experiment with art techniques, create and stare into space. Now that she is retired, she has plenty of time to do that, as well as to tutor and volunteer in the community. When she worked, she was a school/children's librarian at Shelton School, Parish Episcopal and Dallas Public Library. Before that, she was a counselor at Eastfield College and UT-Arlington. Once upon a time, she wanted to be a writer, and she was in a writing group for five years. Barbara is married and has a sweet, spoiled cat named Kitty Katz.

Charles Kesler lived in Dallas for 30 years before moving to East Texas with his wife, Janelle, to be close to family.

Paul Koniecki lives in Dallas. He was once chosen for the Ashbery Home School residency. His poems feature in Richard Bailey's movie, *One of the Rough*, distributed by AVIFF Cannes. Paul proudly sits on the editorial board of *Thimble Literary Magazine*. His poems have appeared in *Henniker Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Gasconade Review*, *As It Ought To Be Magazine*, *Trailer Park Review*, *Poetry Bay* and many more. Paul is currently finishing his MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Paulina Lopez is a museum educator and mother of two. Her toxic trait is speaking in *Gilmore Girls* references. She holds a B.A. from Carleton College and an M.Ed. from Southern Methodist University. She and her husband live with their family in Oak Cliff.

Christopher Moock is a 1992 graduate of Louisiana State University. He is an aural artist and literary enthusiast. In addition to numerous recorded musical works, he has created sound design for international art installations and exhibits. In 2017, he founded Forecast Gallery, an audio production company specializing in original music, sound design, podcast production and music mastering. Christopher lives in Dallas.

Kenoya Musa is a non-binary, Black and Queer writer who focuses on the darker sides of literature. They write anything from poetry, to scripts, to stories.

Kim Nall is a poet and educator from Dallas. She holds a B.A. in communication studies from the University of North Texas and an MFA in creative writing from Carlow University, where she co-curates and emcees the “Raising Our Voices” alumni reading series. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Red Wheelbarrow* and *The Texas Observer*, and at the Dallas Museum of Art.

Carys O'Brien is currently a student at Ursuline Academy of Dallas. In her free time, she enjoys playing volleyball, reading, hiking and spending time outdoors.

Shellie Terry is a writer, editor and content strategist. Originally from California, Shellie started her career as a newspaper reporter and editor and has since led editorial teams at national and regional publications. She currently oversees the content strategy team at Thryv, based in Dallas. Shellie's article and essay topics range from local dining and personality profiles to digital marketing and personal growth.

Marcus Tsai is a sophomore at the University of Texas at Dallas. He enjoys collecting (and never using) notebooks, applying lip balm and rollerblading. You can find him in his room, probably.

Dayna Van Aken teaches English and dual-credit composition in Denton. As a writer of poetry and short stories, she is passionate about sharing her love of language with her students, many of whom humble

her with their own brilliant wordplay. Having already raised two exceptional daughters, she now lives with her wife, their two-year-old son, an intractable dog and a mercurial cat.

Pamela Victoria is a former Houstonian who now lives in Dallas, much to the chagrin of her three children. She holds a B.A. in linguistics from Rice University, an M.A. in South Asian languages and literature from the University of Texas at Austin, and a day job in corporate communications. This is her second year participating in The Common Language Project.

Sarah Rebecca Warren is a writer, educator and musician who lives in Dallas. She received a scholarship to study at the Sewanee Writers' Conference in 2016, and her writing has appeared in *World Literature Today*, *Oklahoma Today*, *Gravel*, *Luna Luna* and other journals. Her poems "Anatomy of an Eating Disorder" and "Chimayo Milagros" won first place in the *Arcturus* Fall 2017 Poetry Contest, adjudicated by Ruben Quesada. Sarah's chapbook, *Price of Admission*, appears in Floodgate Poetry Series Volume 5 (Upper Rubber Boot Books, March 2019). She holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Texas.

Robert Wynne earned his MFA in creative writing from Antioch University. A former co-editor of *Cider Press Review*, he has published six chapbooks and three full-length books of poetry, the most recent being *Self-Portrait as Odysseus*, published in 2011 by Tebot Bach Press. He's won numerous prizes, and his poetry has appeared in magazines and anthologies throughout North America. He lives in Burleson with his wife and their German Shepherd. His online home is www.rwynne.com.



The Writer's Garret
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