

LOVE, LOSS AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME

The Chiltern Arts Poetry Competition 2023 invited poets to explore how things change over time. From over 120 original entries, these 28 poems have been chosen for the 2023 collection.

With many thanks to the honorary members of our judging panel for 2023:

Susan Cooper and Dr Mark Burrows.

**Susan Cooper** is the author of the classic five-book sequence *The Dark is Rising*, which won a Newbery Medal, a Newbery Honor Award, and two Carnegie Honor Awards. Born in England, she was a reporter and feature writer for the London *Sunday Times* before coming to live in the United States. Her writing includes books for children and adults, a Broadway play, films, and Emmy-nominated screenplays. Her most recent novel for children is *The Boggart Fights Back*, and for adults a portrait of Revels founder Jack Langstaff called *The Magic Maker*. In 2012, Susan was given the Margaret A. Edwards Award and in 2013 she received the World Fantasy Award for life achievement. Her most recent titles are picturebooks: *The Word Pirates* and *The Shortest Day*, both published in 2019. Susan lives and writes in Marshfield, Massachusetts.

**Mark S. Burrows, Ph.D.**, is a teacher, poet and translator of German poetry. His academic writings focus on medieval mystical literature, and he is widely known for his work on the intersection of religion and the arts. These interests inspired three popular books of meditative poems drawing on the writings of Meister Eckhart, co-authored with Jon M. Sweeney; the most recent, *Meister Eckhart's Book of Darkness and Light*, was published in March 2023, as was *The Wandering Radiance*, a collection of poems by the German-Jewish poet, Hilde Domin. He is a member of the "Bonn Rilke Project" which has sponsored performance-events of Rilke's *Book of Hours* across Germany since 2014. His award-winning translation of the first part of that book in its original form, *Prayers of a Young Poet* (2013), is the only version of that work in English, and his translation of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* will appear in 2024, as will the new book he co-authored with the Australian writer Stephanie Dowrick, *A Wiser Way: Living Your Deepest Questions with Rainer Maria Rilke*. A collection of his own poems, *The Chance of Home*, was published in 2018.

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## To every thing there is a season

One day, there'll be no P.E. kits on the line.  
I'll take down the netball post, dig up the lawn  
for beds of hollyhocks and lupins, swathes  
of lavender, lay winding paths  
of cobblestones – no good for cartwheels –  
edge them with alyssum, aubretia and, in the corner  
where the footballs gather, an arbour  
of wisteria. One day, I'll sit there with a book,  
pendants of lilac on every side, ignoring  
the clatter of other people's children  
coming home from school. One day,  
I'll hobble back indoors, call someone else  
to raise the beds to save my creaky knees,  
swap cobblestones for level paving slabs.  
One day, the paths will all be gone and children  
not yet born will race across the new-laid lawn,  
trampling seedling foxgloves that forget  
they do not grow here any more.

— Ros Woolner

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## The Photograph

They say  
a photograph can comfort absence  
Not for me.

They say  
it helps with pain,  
that you're still here.

Oh no you're not.

No photograph  
can fill this emptiness  
or meet my eyes across a room

There are no arms to wrap around me now  
to comfort me in times of stress  
to ease my pain.

Only that photograph  
that wretched thing  
that is no use to me

So tear it up they say.

Yes,  
I might do just that  
burn it to ash  
a last goodbye

the way you said goodbye to me.

— Bridget Fraser

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## For Simon

I remember a field and a shadowed place  
And the sun blotted out by your laughing face  
You are jumping and singing, so happily  
And the daisies are almost as high as me  
And you are just six and I am just three.

I remember the scent of the summer grass  
And the flints in the Woods that were smooth as glass  
You were always ahead calling back to me,  
'Hurry up Janey - watch me climb this tree!'  
And you are still six and I am still three.

I remember the winters were always cold  
And anyone past thirty seemed very old.  
Our summers were always spent down by the sea  
And the days were always so hot and sunny  
When you were just six and I was just three.

And looking back through the years, it seems to me  
That was the best time, because you see  
Mum and Dad were our world and ice cream was free  
And our only worry was what we ate for our tea,  
It's a time when I thought you belonged just to me  
Because we were still only six and still only three.

I remember the day our little brother was born  
Mum was away and you were forlorn.  
I can hear you shouting 'It's a boy! Yippee!'  
And suddenly, we were not two but three,  
There were Mum, Dad, Si, Jane and Mikey  
And we were growing past six and growing past three.

We all walked together throughout your life,  
Through all the good times and through all the strife  
And I married a husband and you married - well, wives  
And sometimes I've thought 'How can it be  
That you've grown older than six and I've grown older than three'.

We have journeyed together down all these years,  
Through all the laughter and through all the tears  
Now I see you walking away from me  
And I don't quite understand how that can be,  
But I love you enough to say, 'Go, now you're free'.

I am the last who remembers how it used to be  
When you were my hero and seemed as tall as a tree  
And I will always keep a place deep inside of me  
Where you are still six and I am still three.

## Once I Die

I turned 5 just yesterday  
and I've been an adult for years  
I still sleep in my mum's bed  
and we talk only twice a week

I turn 14 tomorrow  
I have photos of people I've forgotten  
my weeks pass as a slow blur  
and it's been years since I was young

I'm still just a child  
and I never got to be one  
I want to be given all the answers  
but I can solve it myself

I'm still so scared of change  
but I'd hate for things to stay the same  
I'll never grow up  
and I've been old since I was dreaming

— Dess Coleman

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## Her Going

Thomas Nashe, the Elizabethan poet,  
(probably a pirate and a politician  
for weren't they all?), using  
language that was new-coined,  
mint-furnace-hot, so raw-fresh  
a miss-spelling could mutate  
to startling metaphor, wrote:  
"Brightness falls from the air".  
Your absence shocked the line awake,  
honing its old cutting edge  
to dissect my new discovered state;  
my 'Time of Pestilence' perhaps.

— John Harvey

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## At the Going Down of the Sun

The daily order of the day  
That smoke filled  
Numbs its shaky breath.

We stand like waxwork dummies  
To honour those  
Who gave their souls,  
And now speckled poppies  
Blood red  
Dance and waver with delight  
In winter's chill.

Summer grew tired  
Of hiding her forgotten soldiers  
Marching tirelessly on.  
And then the fervent flurry  
Of autumn angst.

Then the monarchy laying wreaths,  
With cosy coats and weary arms  
That hide an anxious past.  
And when the clock has cheerfully chimed,  
We will assume our daily dusting down,  
Nothing will ever change

— Mary Mullett

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## Time Slip

There have been a few days  
Like this before  
When the sky is see-through blue  
And trees are still.  
When I can stare and stare Into the haze  
Until this time becomes  
All time, before and since

Until I can stretch to the past  
with one hand  
And into the future with the other  
Feel my body linking into the chain,  
A moving, writhing chord of creation  
and re-creation

Slippery colours like an elusive rainbow  
Caught between sun and rain  
Now fading, now dazzling.  
Painfully stretching and stretching  
I become a thin, shimmering membrane  
Wrapped around the Earth,  
A spiritual skin,  
Essence etched over the Universe.

Then, the past is no memory,  
The future no expectation. Everything  
is one endless, repeating, reverberating  
Echo, endless experience,  
Light imprinted on universal darkness  
Filling the unbearable emptiness.

— Elizabeth Rodda

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## Beaches

I sit above the beach as others find their way  
along the stony margins.

Old and young, taking their moments,  
transported for a time to some other beach  
by the wash of waves, and the salty breeze.

An old man in sandals, fat with beers,  
bends to find a boyhood stone  
and sends it skimming, over the water.

A woman, in high heels, retrieves one shell from millions,  
and does not let it fall again.

A bride and groom pose, are photographed forever,  
and are gone into the future.

There are so many beaches here  
at once,  
that it cannot be grasped,  
like the Tao.

A couple with rucksacks,  
stare at one spot in the flotsam,  
as though it held all the answers.

At last, I stand,  
bones aching,  
remember running, laughing,  
hand in hand.

— Cecilia Rose

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## Half-knitted Scarf

The half-knitted scarf sits  
tucked in the corner, safe,  
under its coat of dust,  
knowing it will be one day be completed;  
although,  
the chapter should have ended  
so many pages ago,  
its stretched like clingfilm across leftovers  
you won't eat.

Next year, one cold morning,  
you will be somewhere with nothing to do,  
stroking the missed stitch,  
touching the tassels,  
like some sort of religion.  
To you it might be.

The clock ticks forward,  
unnoticed, the days blur together,  
as you grew one line at a time.

— Martha-Jack Fraser, age 17

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## Mother's Touch

The hand on her bump, as the realisation dawns,  
The acknowledgement of a splendored miracle,  
The eagerness to catch your kicking self,  
What she considers her life's very pinnacle;

The cry of relief as her skin touches yours,  
The gentle stroke of hair as she admires,  
The placing of her finger on your delicate nose,  
Her love blazing through,  
A burning fire;

The protection she offers as you climb up the  
staircase,  
The steps,  
The splinters,  
And your tripping stride,  
The staircase that we fear not to call life,  
Her desperation to keep you starry-eyed;

The hand on your shoulder as you blow out  
Every candle.  
The same comfort year after year.  
The birthdays: at three, at eleven, at forty,  
Her tenderness never fails to appear;

The world crashing down and a craving for her hug,  
The solace found in her arms,  
The overflowing yet endless well of affection,  
Wishing, too, cannot beat these charms;

The reluctant but hopeful push out to school,  
The luck given as you first learn to drive.  
The tremble in her voice  
As she waves you goodbye — a developed bee,  
Parting from the Queen's hive;

The whisper in your ear, as you stand at the altar,  
The securing of your dress just before.  
The toll that time's taken on this connection of two,  
Ever-changing  
Yet loving forever more.

The tear forming in her eye as you reveal your secret,  
The same journey beginning, but of yours,  
The hand on your bump, as the realisation dawns,  
Her love pursues, as her daughter matures.

— Khushi Manek, age 17

## Ode to the World's End

I stand alone on the dead ground  
wondering why I survived and you didn't.  
I stand alone on the hills as the skeletons  
reached for me but were held back by the passage of time.  
Their hands forever reach out,  
yearning for safety that their bones  
ache for.

As the world ended, all I did was hide.  
I hid as everyone else tried to stop it  
or spend the last few moments looking for happiness  
in misery. I hid and that saved me,  
and when I emerged I was free.

I was free and everyone else became  
a shell of themselves.  
I am free and you are not.

I stand alone, victorious, on the dead ground.

— Jasmin Beghal, age 16

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## Axiom 1: Forget Lasting Love, Time Only Affirms an Acquired Flavour

There is a four-letter word, familiar to the broken and the whole,  
An invention of the newer ages to cosset fragile hearts or vestige of  
Strange creatures survived through unknown means?  
That word, Love, sweetly hovers beside the innocently exposed  
Ear, then, without warning, Old Hamlet perishes.

Feelings, fleeting, feeble, lost in a sigh. Yet, when carelessly it comes  
Open with both trembling, hopeful hands the contused chest  
Receive again that hollow breath, newborn like it was the first time.

Somewhere in the forgiving darkness, to his coy mistress a lover's  
Whisper. Time's winged chariot hurrying near, an intimate moment pulled taut  
Exhales into non-existence. But this willing soul has learned an addict's recovery. So  
Even though now, the heart resembles not a heart but  
That disfigured, nauseous residuum,

Never can it know the tragic end, be strangled by its own bewildered beat.  
Ostentatiously fragile, upon the sleeve, it must blindly burn,  
Then it is destined to suffer and the keen mind must not pre-empt.  
How the unguarded foetal heart hears the familiar routine and will  
Ingest a novel ecstasy. Reflexively overhydrate, vague, quieting, amniotic.  
No premonition or self-preservationist reasoning. Deny instinct and swallow deeper.  
Garner fallacies of a love that stays, keep them chest-close, familiar like old vices.  
Sing a glad optimism - "time qualifies the spark and fire of love."

— Lana Dissanayake, age 16

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## Kanchan

a city sits in the iridescent heart of a Kanchan flower  
nuzzled in the careful arms of an ashen pillar:  
a sheath for their haunted history concealed  
under seedless skirts.

a petal blushes and flutters  
into a hot heavy sky of  
cooking grease,  
paints the weeping sleeves of ma's Hanfu\*,  
its rubescent thread now uncoiling  
and bleaching white.

they don't know -- I don't know  
the tales of fingers  
gritted with bleeding callouses  
and dead skin  
weaving a fishing village reeking of vitality.

above, they watch  
and mourn  
the deflowering of a  
sterile culture,

for now my daughter and I stand beneath  
the same orchid tree, with  
cursive tongues and diluted minds:  
the last Kanchan flower falls.

— Charmaine Chan, age 17

\*traditional Chinese clothing

[note: Kanchan Flower (*Bauhinia x blakeana*): a sterile plant cultivated artificially from a singular tree at the Botanical Gardens; official floral emblem of Hong Kong]

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## I Gaze at a Night Sky

I gaze at a night sky that you once did too  
How did a 'goodbye' come from a 'see you later'?  
I wonder if you live on the moon's surface,  
And sleep soundly in its craters.  
I wonder all these things,  
But then I realise.  
You cannot force two stars to align,  
That have already burnt out,  
And died.

I wonder if you sleep on sunrise-stained clouds,  
And wave at planes as they pass you by.  
I wonder if you've found the peace that doesn't reside on Earth,  
In the blood orange sky.

— Laila Malik O'Rourke, age 14

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**Let us...**

Let us live like wildflowers,  
Let our ardour disperse by the drift  
Let us bud swift; free and true,  
Dauntless and exquisite  
In each place we inhabit.  
Lets us bud in cleaves and storms  
Lets us bud into the beauty of chaos and finally  
Show the world, who's boss.

— Emaan Dhakwala, age 14

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## Firefly Catchers

sweet tea becomes vodka  
bikes become cars  
kisses blend seamlessly with Sex.

remember when we got high off of  
sugar and sleeplessness?

when the worst thing you could get from boys was  
a peck and a slap?

Remember when

War was only a  
thing on tv, cough medicine  
was the only drug we knew?

wearing That didn't make you a  
slut or a whore, pain was only  
scraped knees?

Remember when

Goodbye  
Only meant  
Good night see you tomorrow

Bright and early

And we couldn't wait for next summer?  
We couldn't wait to get older?

— Amelia Chiarelli, age 15

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## Light to dark, young to old

Going from light to dark  
Each winter season leaves a mark  
The summer's bright the sky's always blue  
When it turns to autumn the leaves change too  
On the same hill top from dusk to dawn  
The sun rises in the sky every early morn  
A man and girl sit on a bench  
The man kneels down it makes no sense  
He pulls out a box and opens the lid  
She gasped with delight oh yes she did  
A ring on her finger belles are ringing  
The birds in the trees are chirping and singing  
As the days get shorter every night  
The same couple are there to the birds delight  
They sit there as the leaves go green to brown  
Then the leaves fall of and snow covers the ground  
They grow old together the same bench every day  
The snowbells start to sprout and the snow begins to fade away  
Going from light to dark  
Each winter season leaves a mark

— Skye Forster, age 13

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## My Backyard Tree and Me

The seasons change,  
just like you and me  
we were once cute, innocent, and petite,  
but look at us now  
We are all grown up,  
just like our backyard tree  
I still remember how it got there,  
like it was just yesterday  
There was a tree before ours,  
it produced many seeds,  
but only one survived,  
many of us were set free,  
but only both of us survived  
It grew from a seedling,  
to a little green plant  
we grew from a seedling,  
two babies that's right  
two grown babies  
From winter to fall,  
from autumn to spring  
we change the same way,  
you changed  
and we all got bigger.  
I look at you now, all big, strong, and tall,  
and I recall when you were small,  
and I was tall,  
and I almost uprooted you from the world  
I was once mommy's little girl,  
so sweet and innocent  
now I'm daddy's big girl,  
all cunning and sly  
But that's what a young lady,  
must do in order to survive around here,  
because even though I have changed like you  
I'm not as strong as you are,  
I wish, oh, I really wish, I was stronger and tougher like you are.

— Zion Jesubamikole, age 15

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## The River Soul

I follow the river that lies before me.  
That wanders and meanders quick and free —  
If I leave it, it always finds its way back,  
No matter how far I go or what necessities I lack.

The river carries on, long and arduous,  
The stream of soul, pure and continuous.  
Sometimes I stroll off, and it runs still with essence.  
But I feel lost — gone is the luminescence.

It lies long back to what I once was.  
Every hope, love, and loss.  
Once I was a child, and then youth,  
Yet still it runs on, as if in a loop.

Occasionally I look up and think of the lakes.  
The lakes! The streams! All of them I have been in...  
My mind knows what can happen and what did,  
Yet my heart wishes not to and closes its fragile eyelid.

I follow the river that lies before me,  
Until it flows into the dark yet hopeful sea,  
And that, that is where I leave the river,  
Where amid thousands I am yet a sliver.

— Aishni Mishra, age 12

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## Gracie

hey calico  
hi kitty cat  
please come rub against my leg  
and I can be  
a kid again  
and hug you  
while I sleep

hi calico  
hey kitty cat  
please curl up with me on the couch  
and I can brush  
out all your fur  
and you can  
purr again

hey calico  
hi kitty  
I love you more than you will know  
I hope you're  
somewhere better  
now and that  
you can be happy

I'll never be a kid again  
I'll never be that free  
but you're ok and we  
can pretend  
that everything's fine  
I'll never be a kid again  
I'll never love that pure  
but there's still some here  
for you  
if you ever need me again

your fur beneath my fingers  
your heart now still and cold  
buried in the backyard now  
for the earth to hold  
treat her well forever please  
don't hurt her anymore  
she's been through so much now  
if I can't hold her I know you should

— Luci Moncayo, age 14

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## The Flower in my memory

Like a misguided flower yet to bloom,  
I came into this world.  
Ever since I could learn to understand,  
You have been my guide.  
When I was in my blooming stages,  
When I was as small as a sprout,

You taught me the way of life;  
How to love and to thrive  
We always had a connection,  
They said we came from the same root.  
I would present to you my prides,  
And you would tell me your story.  
When my petals started to saturate,  
And my stem was thick and strong,  
It felt we were invincible,  
That this would be everlasting love.  
As we aged together,  
I young and you old.  
We concurred that we would be together,  
Until another truth be told.  
Years had we known each other,  
12 to be precise.  
But your stem was faulty,  
And your petals were hard and black.  
An ailment of unknown origin,  
Seeping into your veins.  
Your leaves thorny and drooped,  
Your roots crippled and decaying.  
Time was taking its toll,  
But we weren't finished.  
We could have had so much more,  
But the timer was ticking.

And as I watched you wither away,  
As I watched you fade.  
I thought about the times we shared,  
So, in my memory you will stay.

— Lyra Thornton, age 12

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## Out My Window

Out my window, on a cold winter day, I see:  
Snow, lots of it, falling onto the ground  
Cars struggling, going round and round  
Children sleighing  
People playing  
The cold, white, slippery frost  
Covering the green, rough, fuzzy moss  
That, is winter

Out my window, on a rainy spring day, I sense:  
Leaves growing, no more snowing  
The sun shining down  
No people with frowns  
Baby plants, bird chants  
That, is spring

Out my window, on a hot summer day, I sense:  
The sun rising  
People's faces shining  
Bird's wings flapping  
People chatting  
The sun is shining bright No more lights!  
Exetremely sunny  
Little bunnies  
That, is summer

Out my window, on a windy autumn day, I sense:  
Apricot orange leaves  
The chilly degrees  
Conkers that go 'Crack' under your shoes  
Animals collecting the food that they'll lose  
Chestnuts falling from the frosty, wet trees  
A nip in the air and a chill in the breeze  
That, is autumn

— Lily Brown, age 8

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## Waiting

She's waiting, waiting, waiting  
For letters to come home  
As her children sit in trenches  
Suffering alone.

She's waiting, waiting, waiting  
For news of her sons  
As her children sit worried  
About the shots of the guns.

She's waiting, waiting, waiting  
For the bells to ring out.  
Hoping for the war to be over  
To get rid of this doubt.

She's waiting, waiting, waiting  
For a knock on the door  
And not images of her son  
Dead on the floor.

— Poppy Lincoln, age 10

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## Snake

I stared at it  
the monochrome ball  
I touched it  
it was rather small

A crack appeared  
and a tiny head popped out  
A little snake wriggled out

I kept him as my own  
my own little pet  
Over time he grew  
The longest he could get

I knew I couldn't keep him  
I had to let him go  
In the forest, where he belonged

I had kept him for ages  
It felt sad to let him go  
I sauntered to the forest  
very, very slow

He looked at me  
and slithered away  
as slow as a sloth, wanting to stay

Even though we both grew old  
I saw him every day  
and he saw me  
and it stayed this way

— Siri Vyapur, age 10

## The City

Without a cathedral, it is just a town  
Looked on by lords, with a frown.  
So they built a cathedral, fit for a king,  
And how the people did sing.

The city grew and grew  
And all old buildings were made new  
Skyscrapers were built so high,  
That they nearly touched the sky!

They used to drive around in carts,  
But now the people are so smart,  
They travel around in aeroplanes,  
And they have nearly gone insane!

But now the people are at war,  
And in the sky, jet planes soar  
All the people run in fear,  
And they wonder how they got here!

— Zachary Ayres, age 9

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## The big change in my life

I didn't know my life would change,  
and so it felt very strange.  
I thought things would be the same,  
but no! It was indeed a different game.

My brother came into existence  
when I saw from a distance  
I was asked to be responsible,  
suddenly all my actions became impossible.

I was asked to share my toys,  
and that I did with the least of joys.  
Oh my brother! What a boy,  
For all these years, I was so coy.  
He came and took my place,  
For attention, began my race.

Now after many years,  
I have overcome my fears.  
Making me happy, with no more tears,  
he is now the apple of my eye,  
to hatred and jealousy, I have said good bye!

— Tashvi Ganeshwade, age 10

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## Communication

Shouting and smoke code  
Coins click in red phone boxes  
Mobile phones ringing

— Austin Lawrence, age 10

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## The Changing of the Seasons

First comes the spring where the dandelions grow,  
The birds twitter in the trees,  
The grass grows tall and lush and green,  
And all around is the buzzing of the bees.

Then, spring rolls into summer,  
The land is hot and dry,  
And people swarm around ice cream shops!  
No clouds are in the sky.

Then comes the autumn,  
When things start to get raw,  
The leaves turn red and amber,  
Then they fall down to the floor.

And finally, comes the winter,  
The nippiest of all,  
Frost and fog, mist and rain,  
The snow begins to fall.

— Amaya Shehab, age 10