

THE POT OF EARTH

Archibald MacLeish (1925)

These (the gardens of Adonis,) were baskets or pots filled with earth in which wheat, barley, lettuces, fennel, and various kinds of flowers were sown and tended for eight days, chiefly or exclusively by women. Fostered by the sun's heat, the plants shot up rapidly, but having no root they withered as rapidly away, and at the end of eight days were carried out with the images of the dead Adonis and flung with them into the sea or into springs.

Sir JAMES C FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*



PART ONE

*"For if the sun breed maggots in a dead
dog, being a god-kissing carrion, - Have you
a daughter?"*

"I have, my lord."

"Let her not walk i' the sun -"

THE SOWING OF THE DEAD CORN

Silently on the sliding Nile
The rudderless, the unoared barge
Diminishing and for a while
Followed, a flock upon the large
Silver, then faint, then vanished, passed
Adonis who had once more died
Down a slow water with the last
Withdrawing of a fallen tide.

*

That year they went to the shore early -
They went in March and at the full moon
The tide came over the dunes, the tide came
To the wall of the garden. She remembered standing,
A little girl in the cleft of the white oak tree -
The waves came in a slow curve, crumpling
Lengthwise, kindling against the mole and smoldering

Foot by foot across the beach until
The whole arc guttered and burned out. Her father
Rested his spade against the tree. He said,
The spring comes with the tide, the flood water.
Are you waiting for spring? Are you watching for the spring?
He threw the dead stalks of the last year's corn
Over the wall into the sea. He said,
Look, we will sow the spring now. She could feel
Water along dry leaves and the stems fill.
Hurry, she said, Oh, hurry. She was afraid.
The surf was so slow, it dragged, it came stumbling
Slower and slower. She tried to breathe as slowly
As the waves broke. She kept calling, Hurry! Hurry!
Her breath came so much faster than the sea -

*

One night it rained with a south wind and a warm
Smell of thawed earth and rotting straw and ditches
Sodden with snow and running full. She lay
Alone in the dark and after a long time
She fell asleep and the rain dripped in the gutter;
Dripped, dropped, and the wind washed over the roof
And winter melted and she felt the flow
Of the wind like a smooth river, and she saw
The moon wavering over her through the water -

And after the rain the brook in the north ravine
Ran blood-red – after the rain they found
Purple hepaticas and violets.

Stained crimson –

Are the waters fed

In the hill side?

She heard the drip, the beat

Of seas gathering underground. She heard

The moon moving under Perkins Street –

Why do you circle here, O lost sea bird?

Under the root of the pine-tree, under the stone

She heard the red surf breaking.

This occurred

When she was thirteen years –

Oh, she felt

Ill. It was horrible. She thought of one

Dead, and the weeping . . .

In March the snows melt

Dribbling between the shriveled roots till they brim
The soaked soil, till the moon comes, until
The moon compels them; and the surf at the sea rim
Breaks into scarlet and the pine roots spill
Rivers of blood. There was blood upon her things.
She brought home violets enough to fill
The yellow bowl with the pattern of pigeon wings –

I am afraid of the moon. I am afraid of the moon still.

*

The sound of the sea breaking beyond the wall
Was surd, flat, stopped as the voice of a deaf woman.
Dead leaves tiptoed in the path.
The trees listened -
And she saw the blind moon climb through the colorless air
Through the willow branches. She could feel the moon
Lifting the numb water, and the sea fill.
She thought, The spring will come now overflowing
The clean earth. And what will the pine cone do,
The skulls and kernels that the winter gathered –
What will they do –

We are having a late spring, we are having
The snow in April, the grass heaving
Under the wet snow, the grass
Burdened and nothing blossoms, grows
In the fields nothing and the garden fallow;
And now the wild birds follow
The wild birds and the thrush is tame.
Well, there is time still, there is time.
Tomorrow there will be tomorrow
And summer swelling through the marrow
Of the cold trees.

Wait! Let us wait!

Let us wait until tomorrow. The wet
Snow wrinkles, it will rot,
It will molder at the root
Of the oak tree. Wait!

Oh, wait? I will gather

Grains of wheat and corn together,
Ears of corn and dry barley.
But wait, but only wait. I am barely
Seventeen: must I make haste?
Tomorrow there will be a host

Of crocuses and small hairy
Snowdrops. And why, then, must I hurry?
There are things I have to do
More than just to live and die
More than just to die of living.
I have seen the moonlight leaving
Twig by twig the elms and wondered
Where I go, where I have wandered.

I have watched myself alone
Coming homeward in the lane
When I seemed to see a meaning
In my going or remaining
Not the meaning of the grass,
Not the dreaming mortal grace
Of the green leaves on the year -

And why, then, should I hear
A sound as of the sowers going down
Through blossoming young hedges in the dawn -
Winter is not done.

*

There were buds on the chestnut-trees, soft, swollen,
Sticky with thick gum, that seemed to press,
To thrust from the cold branches, to start under
The impulse of intolerable loins -
The faint sweet smell of the trees sickened her
She walked at the sea's edge on the blank sand.

Certainly the salt stone that the sea divulges
At the first quarter does not fructify
In pod or tuber nor will the fruiterer cull
Delicate plums from its no-branches - Oh,

Listen to me for the word of the matter is in me -
And if it heats in the sun it heats to itself
Alone and to none that come after it and the rain
Impregnates it not to the slightest - Oh, listen,
You who lie on your backs in the sun, roots,
Roses among others taking the rain
Into you, vegetables, listen - the salt stone
That the sea divulges does not fructify.
It sits by itself. It is sufficient. But you -
Who was your great-grandfather or your mother's mother?

*

One of those mild evenings when you think
Spring is tomorrow and you can smell the earth
Smoldering under wet leaves and there's still
A little light left over the tree top
And you stand listening –

So she closed the gate
And walked up Gloucester Street and coming home
It was pitch dark at the railroad station they
Jostled against her Oh excuse me! excuse me!
And somebody said, laughing – she couldn't hear:
Her throat pounded – something she ran ran –
What do you want? What do you want me to do?
What can I do? Can I put roots in the earth?
Can leaves grow out of me? Can I bear leaves
Like the thorn, the lilac –

Why did you not come?
Why did you let me go then if you knew?

*

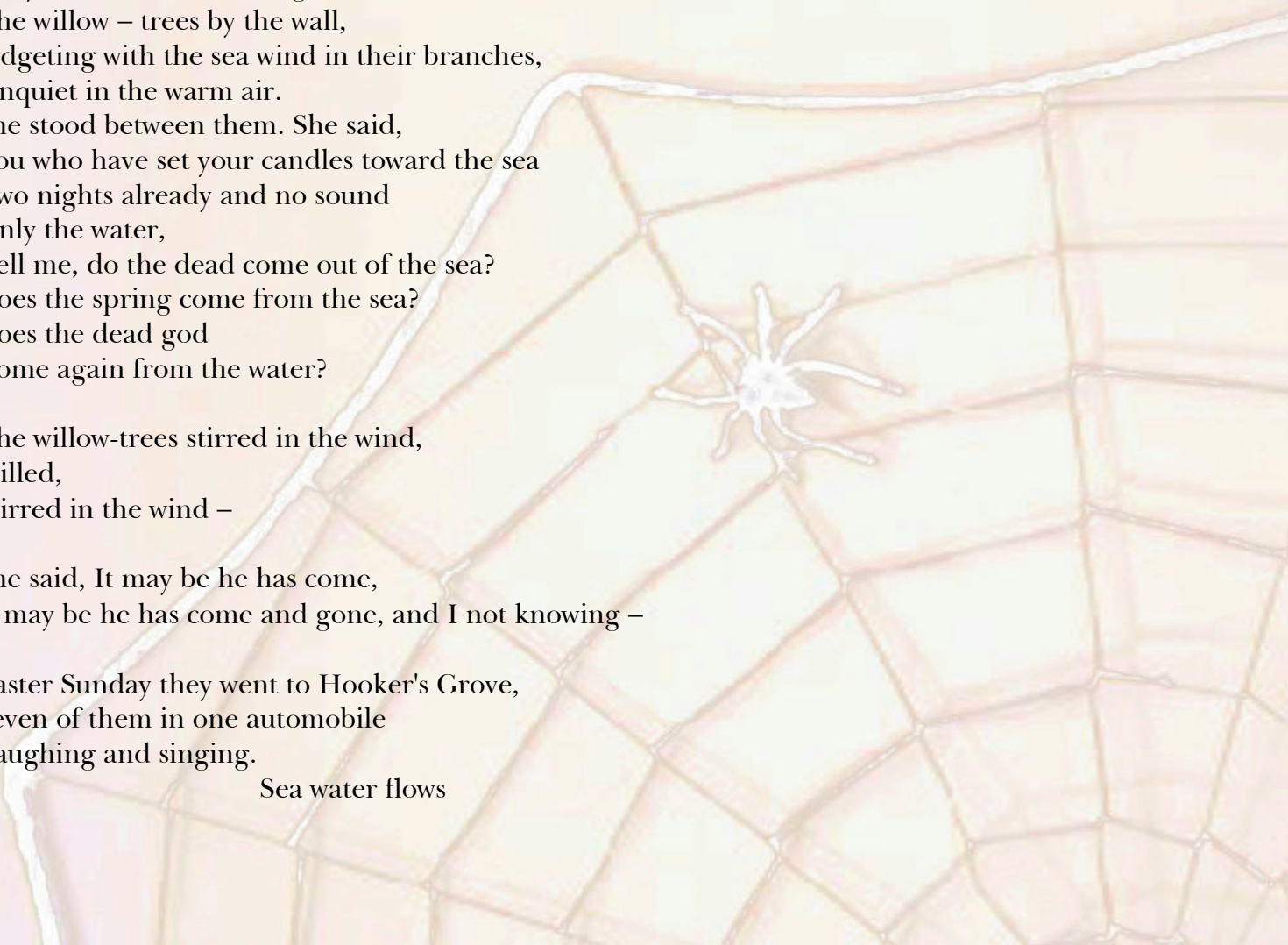
They seemed to be waiting,
The willow – trees by the wall,
Fidgeting with the sea wind in their branches,
Unquiet in the warm air.
She stood between them. She said,
You who have set your candles toward the sea
Two nights already and no sound
Only the water,
Tell me, do the dead come out of the sea?
Does the spring come from the sea?
Does the dead god
Come again from the water?

The willow-trees stirred in the wind,
Stilled,
Stirred in the wind –

She said, It may be he has come,
It may be he has come and gone, and I not knowing –

Easter Sunday they went to Hooker's Grove,
Seven of them in one automobile
Laughing and singing.

Sea water flows



Over the meadows at the full moon,
The sea runs in the ditches, the salt stone
Drowns in the sea.

And someone said, Look! Look!

The flowers, the red flowers,

Shall we go

Up through the Gorge or round by Ryan's place?
I'll show you where the wild boar killed a man.
I'll show you where the . . .

Who is this that comes

Crowned with red flowers from the sea? Who comes
Into the hills with flowers?

On the hill pastures

She heard a girl calling her lost cows.
Her voice hung like a mist over the grass,
Over the apple-trees.

She bit her mouth

To keep from crying.

On the third day

The cone of the pine is broken, the eared corn
Broken into the earth, the seed scattered.
The bridegroom comes again at the third day.
The sowers have come into the fields sowing.
Well, at the Grove there was a regular crowd
And a band at the Casino, so they ate
Up in the woods where you could hear the music
And the dogs barking, and after lunch she lay
Out in the open meadow. She could feel
The sun through her dress –

Don't you want to dance?

They're all dancing – that wonderful tune –
Are you listening? Aren't you listening?

The band

Start stuttered and
Oh, won't you?

No-

Just a little while. Just a little bit –
No! Oh, No! Oh, No!

Far, far away

The singing on the mountain. She could hear
The voices singing, she could hear them come
With songs, with the red flowers. They have found him,
They have brought him from the hills –

Why, it was wonderful! Why, all at once there were leaves,
Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small, alive

Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful,
You can't imagine. They came by the wood path
And the earth loosened, the earth relaxed, there were flowers
Out of the earth! Think of it! And oak-trees
Oozing new green at the tips of them and flowers
Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers, limp
Stalks flowering. Well, it was like a dream,
It happened so quickly, all of a sudden it happened –

PART TWO

THE SHALLOW GRASS

The plow of tamarisk wood which is shared with black copper
And drawn by a yoke of oxen all black
Drags in. the earth.
The earth is made ready with copper
The earth is prepared for the seed by the feet of oxen
That are shod with brass.

*

They said, Good Luck! Good Luck! What a handsome couple!
Isn't she lovely though! He can't keep his
Hands off her. Ripe as a peach she is. Good Luck!
Good-bye, Good-bye –'

They took the down express,
The five-five. She had the seat by the window -
He can't keep –

She sat there looking out -
And the fields were brown and raw from the spring plowing,
The fields were naked, they were stretched out bare,
Rigid, with long welts, with open wounds,
Stripped –

In the fiat sunlight she could see
The fields heave against the furrows, lift
Twist to get free –

– his hands –

Why, what's the matter?
We're almost there now, only half an hour.
We'll have our supper in our rooms. I've taken
The best room, what they call the bridal chamber -
What they call – what do they call it? –

And I dressed up

All in these new things not a red ribbon
You ever had on before and mind you keep
The shoes you were married in and all to go
Into a closed room with a bed in it,
To lie in a shut chamber,

 what they call –
Something
 the chalked letters
 does he say

That
 I wonder
 or what –

 She held his hand
Against her breast under the flowers. She felt
The warmth of it like the warmth of the sun driving
Downward into her heart.

 And all those fields
Ready, the earth stretched out upon those fields
Ready, and now the sowers –

What is this thing we know that they have not told us?
What is this in us that has come to bed
In a closed room?

*

I tell you the generations
Of man are a ripple of thin fire burning
Over a meadow, breeding out of itself
Itself, a momentary incandescence
Lasting a long time, and we that blaze
Now, we are not the fire, for it leaves us.

I tell you we are the shape of a word in the air
Uttered from silence behind us into silence
Far beyond, and now between two strokes
Of the word's passing have become the word –
That jars on through the night;

I

 and the stirred air
Deadens,
 is still-

*

They lived that summer in a furnished flat
On the south side of Congress Street and no
Sun, but you could look into the branches
Of all those chestnut-trees, and then they had
A window-box, but the geraniums
Died leaving a little earth and the wind
Or somehow one June morning there was grass
Sprouting –

How does your garden grow, your garden
In the shallow dish, in the dark, how does it grow?
Tomorrow we bear the milk corn to the river,
Tomorrow we go to the spring with the pale stalks:

Has your garden ripened?

She used to water them
Morning and evening and the blades grew
Yellow a sort of whitey yellowy all
Fluffy

hairs from a dead skull
they say

The skulls of dead girls –

Won't it let you lie
Even, burgeoning from your bones, your dead
Bones, from your body, not even die, not just
Be dead, be quiet?

What is this thing that sprouts
From the womb, from the living flesh, from the live body?
What does it want? Why won't it let you alone
Not even dead?

Why, look, you are a handful
Of fat mold breeding corruption, a pinch
Of earth for seed fall –

How does your garden grow?

Hot nights the whole room reeked with the fetid smell
Of chestnut flowers, the live smell, the fertile
Odor of blossoms. She half drowsed. She dreamed
Of long hair fragrant with almonds growing
Out of her dead skull, she dreamed of one
Buried, and out of her womb the corn growing.

*

Construe the soundless, slow
Explosion of a summer cloud, decipher
The sayings of the wind beneath the pantry door,
Say when the moon will come, when the rain will follow -

Unless the rain comes soon the colored petals
Sheathing the secret stigma of the rose
Will fall, will wither, and the swollen womb
Close, harden, upon a brittle stalk
Seal up its summer, and the hollyhock,
The broom, the furze, the poppy will become,
Their petals fallen, all their petals fallen,
Peascod's – seedboxes – haws –

It should have rained when the moon
Spilled out the old moon's shadow.
Seven days I have been waiting for the rain now,
The sound of water.
Seven days I have been walking up and down in the house.
There was nothing to do, there was. nothing to do but wait,
But wait, but walk and walk
And at night hear
The patter of dry leaves on the window and wake,
And waking, think, The rain! Yes – and hear
The patter of dry leaves.
There was nothing to do, there was nothing to do but wait,
But wait, but wait but wait, and the wind whispering
Something I couldn't understand beneath the door,
Something that I wouldn't understand.
And the grass stems
Stiffening to bear the headed grain,
The rose,
The hawthorn
Covering with bony fingers
Their swollen wombs,
The summer shriveling to husks, to shells,
Peascods, seedboxes,
The summer sucking through a withered straw
Enough stale water for a few beans,
For a handful of swelling peas in a sealed bladder,
For the living something in a closed womb.

*

Upon the sand
This brine, these bubbles –
The wave of summer is drowned in the salt land.
And I, the climbing tip
Of that old ivy, time,
To waver swaying over a blind wall
With all



Death with the apothegm that all men die.

Yes.

And then wake alone at night and lie here
Stripped of my memories, without the chairs
And walls and doors and windows that have been
My recognition of myself, my soul's
Condition, the whole habit of my mind -
Yes, wake, and of the close, unusual dark
Demand an answer, crying, What am I?

Ah, What! A naked body born to bear
Nakedness suffering. A sealed mystery
With hands to feed it, with unable legs,
With shamed eyes meaning – what? What do they mean,
The red haws out there underneath the snow,
What do they signify?

Glory of women to grow big and die
Fruitfully, glory of women to be broken;
Pierced by the green sprout, severed, tossed aside
Fruitfully –

Yes, all right. Yes, Yes,

But what about me –

What am I –

What do you think

I am–

What do you take me for!

Snow, the snow–

When shall I be delivered?

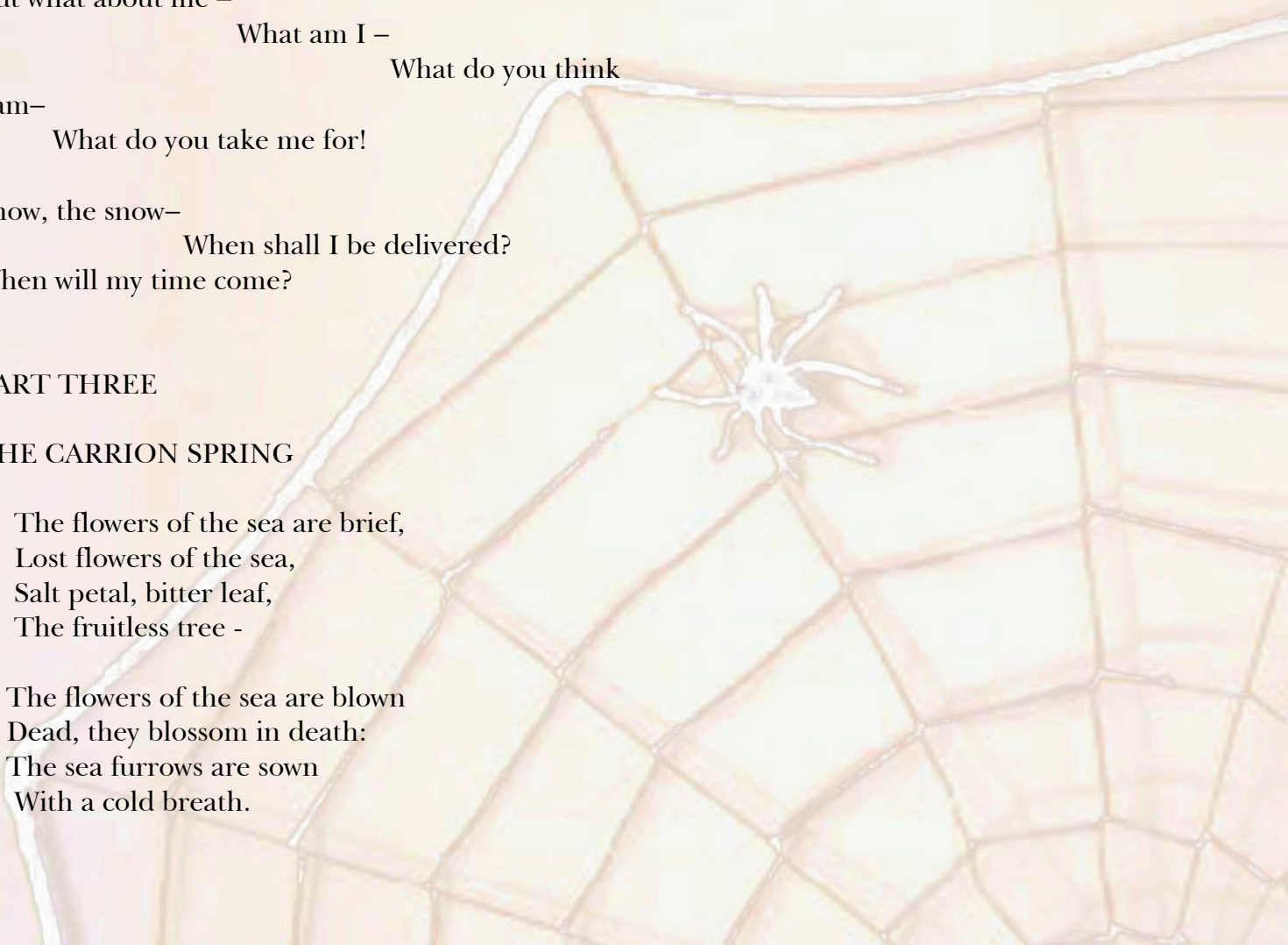
When will my time come?

PART THREE

THE CARRION SPRING

The flowers of the sea are brief,
Lost flowers of the sea,
Salt petal, bitter leaf,
The fruitless tree -

The flowers of the sea are blown
Dead, they blossom in death:
The sea furrows are sown
With a cold breath.



I heard in my heart at night
The sea crying, Come home;
Come home. I thought of the white
Cold flowers of foam.

*

In March, when the snow melted, he was born.
She lay quiet in the bed. She lay still
Dying.

Under the iron rumble
Of the streets she heard the rolling
Boulders that the flood tides tumble
Climbing sea by sea the shoaling
Ledges – she could hear the tolling
Sea.

She lay alone there.

In the morning
They came and went about her,
Moving through the room. She asked them
Whispering. They told her,
He is here. She said, Who is it,
Who is it that is born, that is here?
She said, Do you not know him?
Have you seen the green blades gathered?
Have you seen the shallow grain?
Do you know, – do you not know him? *

Laugh, she said, I am delivered,
I am free, I am no longer
Burdened. I have borne the summer
Dead, the corn dead, the living
Dead. I am delivered.
He has left me now. I lie here
Empty, gleaned, a reaped meadow,
Fearing the rain no more, not fearing
Spring nor the flood tides overflowing
Earth with their generative waters –
Let me sleep, let me be quiet.
I can see the dark sail going
On and on, the river flowing
Red with the melting of the snow:
What is this thing we know? –



Under the iron street the crying
Voices of the sea. Come home,
Come to your house. Come home.

She heard

A slow crying in the sea, Come home,
Come to your house –

*

Go secretly and put me in the ground –
Go before the moon uncovers,
Go where now no night wind hovers,
Say no word above me, make no sound.
Heap only on my buried bones
Cold sand and naked stones
And come away and leave unmarked the mound.
Let not those silent hunters hear you pass:
Let not the trees know, nor the thirsty grass,
Nor secret rain
To breed from me some living thing again,
But only earth –

Oh let my flesh be drowned
In her deep silences and never found!

*

The slow spring blossomed again, a cold
Bubbling of the corrupted pool, a frothy
Thickening, a ferment of soft green
Bubbling –

Who knows how deep the roots drink?
They drink deep,

And you, what do you hope?
What do you believe, walking
Alone in an old garden, staring down
Beneath the shallow surface of the grass,
The floating green? What do you say you are?
And what was she that you remember, staring
Down through the pale grass, what was she?
And what is this that grows in an old garden?

Listen, I will interpret to you. Look, now,
I will discover you a thing hidden,
A secret thing. Come, I will conduct you
By seven doors into a closed tomb.
I will show you the mystery of mysteries.
I will show you the body of the dead god bringing forth

The corn. I will show you the reaped ear
Sprouting.

Are you contented? Are you answered?

Come.

I will show you chestnut branches budding
Beyond a dusty pane and a little grass
Green in a window-box and silence stirred,

Settling and stirred and settling in an empty room –

Archibald MacLeish

