

## 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 fleck 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?

\*

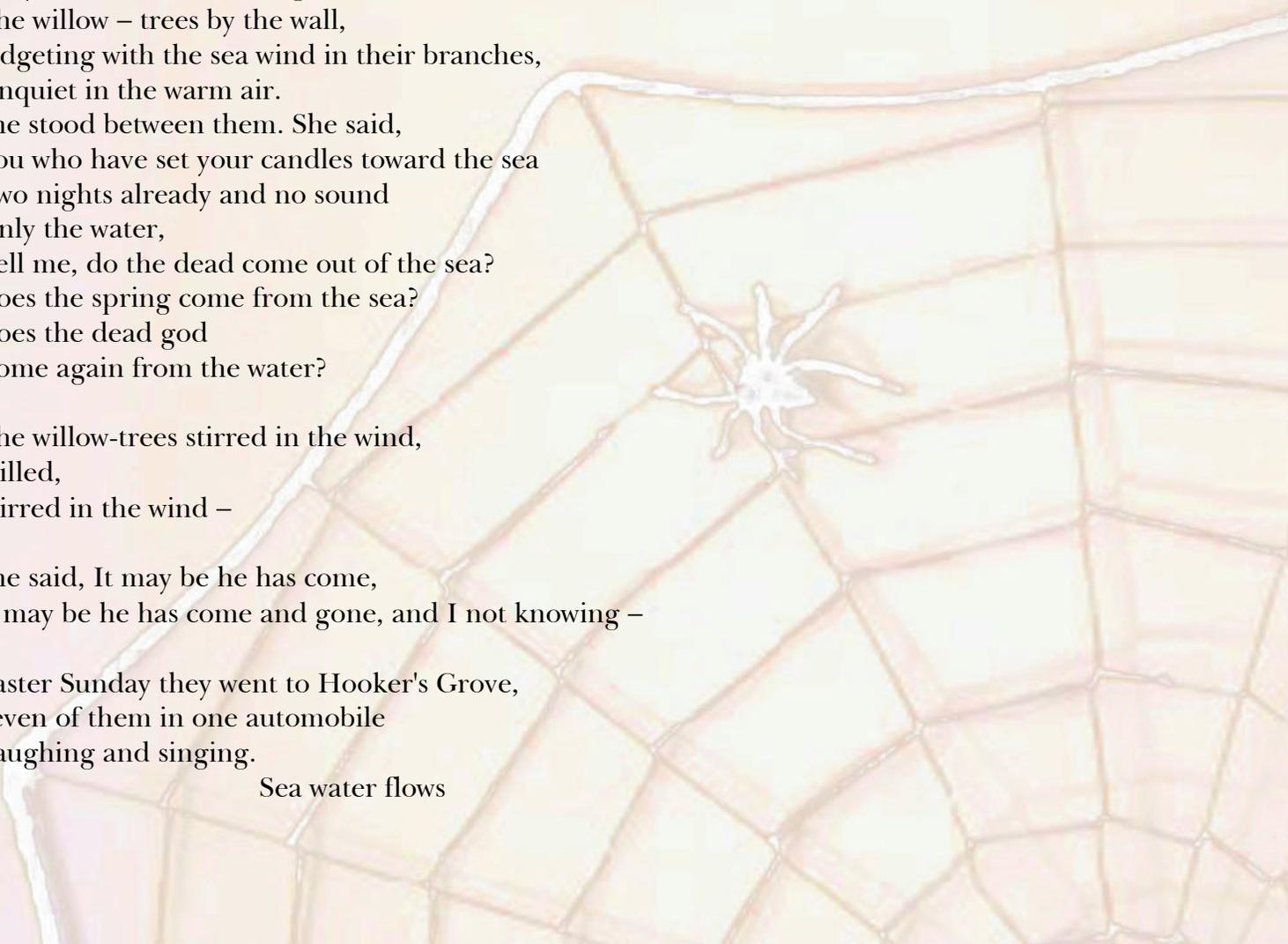
They seemed to be waiting,  
The willow – trees by the wall,  
Fidgeting with the sea wind in their branches,  
Unquiet in the warm air.  
She stood between them. She said,  
You who have set your candles toward the sea  
Two nights already and no sound  
Only the water,  
Tell me, do the dead come out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



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 ie

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?

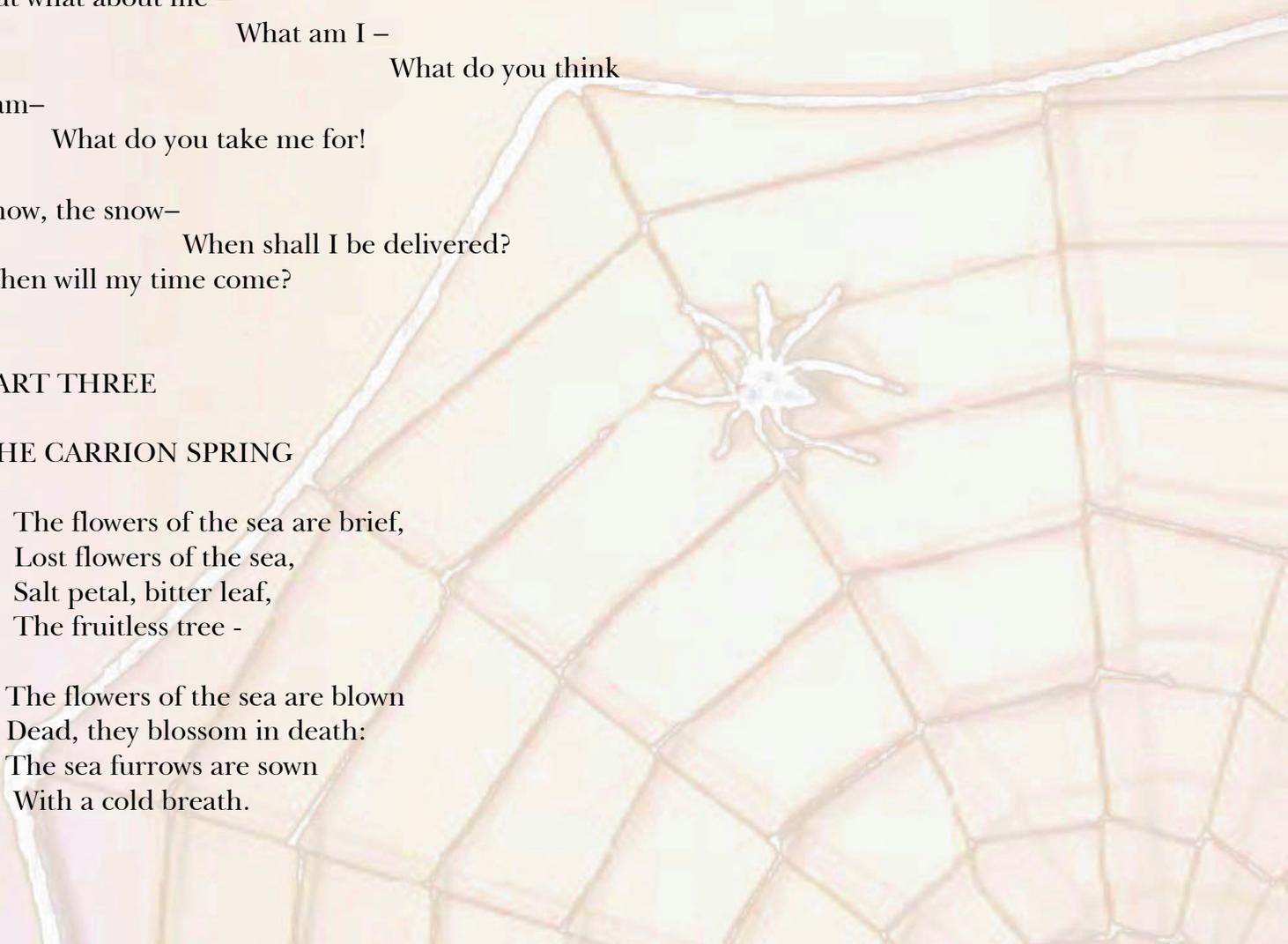
When will my time come?

### 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

