



# The Pot of Earth

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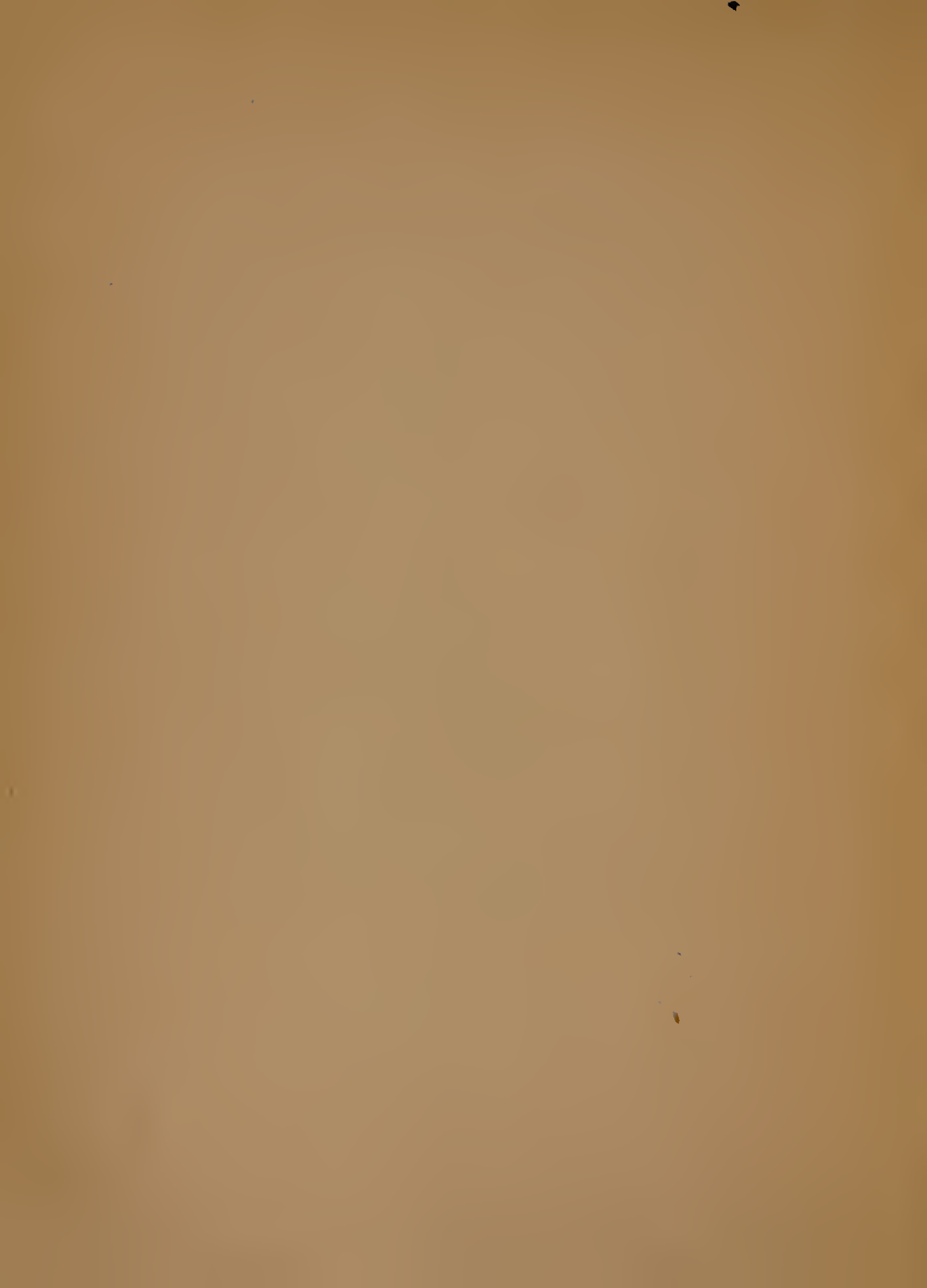


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*The Potter's Workshop*

**THE POT OF EARTH**





THE  
POT OF EARTH

BY  
ARCHIBALD MACLEISH  
*Author of "The Happy Marriage"*



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FOR A.





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 G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*

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# THE POT OF EARTH

*'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 —'*

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## PART ONE

### 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 lately 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  
smouldering

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 —

And walking home from school, that Syrian  
woman,  
That — “Mrs. what did they call her” — the  
Syrian



Up at the corner, she gave her a blood-root  
flower

With white petals and the scarlet ooze  
Where the stem was broken. She said, In my  
country

The feet of spring are stained with the red  
blood,

The women go into the hills with flowers  
Dark like blood, they have a song of one  
Dead and the spring blossoming from his  
blood —

And he comes again, they say, when the spring  
comes.

She gave the flower with soft fingers. She  
said,

That is an old story, — it might not be  
true.

But who knows where the roots drink: they  
go deep.



The stem lay limp and heavy in her hand  
And cold, and the leaves felt lifeless. And  
that night

She put it by her bed. She could not sleep,  
Feeling the dead thing by her bed, feeling  
The slow fingers feeling, feeling the earth  
Divided by the fingers of the grass,  
Of trees, of flowers, by the pressing fingers  
Of grass pierced, feeling the earth pierced  
And the limp stalk flowering — she could not  
sleep —

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.

Have you seen  
Anemones growing wild in the wet ground?  
She took her shoes off and the stream ran red  
With a slow swirling and a swollen sound



Clouding the cold sea water. She wished she  
were dead

With dark flowers and her naked feet  
Stained crimson —

Tell me, are the waters fed  
In the hillside?

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 —

When the withered cone  
Fell from the pine-tree in the ancient spring  
The river turned to blood — and they had  
gone



Mourning the dead god — She heard them  
sing  
Wandering on the mountain.

Oh, she felt  
Ill. It was horrible. She thought of him  
Dead, and the weeping.

In March the snows melt  
Dribbling between the shrivelled roots till  
they brim  
The soaked soil, till the moon comes, until  
The moon compels them; and the surf at the  
sea's rim  
Breaks scarlet and beneath the pine roots  
spill  
Rivers of blood. There was blood upon her  
things  
That night. And she had 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.

They played at weddings, she and her little  
sister.

She had a mother doll made of a pine cone  
With pebble eyes and they found a husk of  
corn

In the leaves over the rose roots. They were  
married

At four in the garden and when the tide  
turned

The bridegroom was dead and she made a  
boat of shingles

With a black sail and set him on the sea

Mourning.

She watched him till the sky was grey



And the sea grey under it. Her eyes blurred.  
She seemed to be looking backward thousands  
of years

Across grey water. She stared out across  
Centuries of grey sea light and the black  
sail

Went on and on. She said, We have known  
this thing

A long time — there is a thing we know —  
The light grew fainter, fainter. The ship fell,  
Vanished —

She went up through the dark garden.  
She put her hand into the earth.

Do you think the dead will come from the sea  
ever?

Do the dead come out of the sea? Do the dead  
rise

From the sea, from the salt pools, from the  
stale water?



I have heard the summer drip into the sea.  
I have heard rain-rotted summer in the  
    sluices  
Foaming. I have seen the yellow spill  
Of last year's summer —

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 over-  
    flowing



The clean earth. And what will the pine cone  
do,  
The skulls and kernels that the winter gath-  
ered —  
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.  
To-morrow there will be to-morrow  
And summer swelling through the marrow  
Of the cold trees.



Wait! Let us wait!

Let us wait until to-morrow. The wet  
Snow wrinkles, it will rot,  
It will moulder 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?  
To-morrow there will be a host  
Of crocuses and small hairy  
Snow-drops. 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, you  
    roots,  
You roses among others who take 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 to-morrow and you can smell the  
    earth  
Smouldering under wet leaves and there's  
    still  
A little light left over the pine-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 O 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 into 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 that 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 some one said, Look! Look!  
The flowers, the red flowers. And her hand  
felt

The blood-root stem — and on the Baalbec  
road

Young men with garlands of anemones  
And naked girls in girdles of wild rose  
Splashed the thick dust from their thudding  
feet

And the sunlight jingled into grains of gold  
And away off, away off, far away  
The singing on the mountain —



Shall we go  
Up through the Gorge or round by Ryan's  
place?

I'll show you where the wild boar killed a man  
Good Friday night, and where he died, they  
say,

There are flowers all red.

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  
Away from 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 flat 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.  
And 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, far beyond, and now between two strokes  
Of the word's passing have become the word —  
That jars on through the night;

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?

To-morrow we bear the milk corn to the river,  
To-morrow 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 die  
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 mould 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 grow-  
ing.



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 be-  
come,  
Their petals fallen, all their petals fallen,  
Pease-cods — 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 shrivelling to husks, to shells,  
Pease-cods, 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.





Has come time's length through his old windy  
house

For this —

For what, then?

Neither.

I am a woman in a waterproof

Walking beside the river in an autumn rain.

Above the trolley bridge the market gardens

Are charnel fields where the unburied corn

Rots and the rattling pumpkin vines lift

brittle fingers

Warning — of what? — and livid, broken

skulls

Of cabbages gape putrid in a pond —

My face under the cold rain is cold

As winter leaves that cover up the year.



I feel the wind as the numb earth feels it.  
I feel the heavy seed in the warm dark  
And the spring ripening —

And what is this to be a woman? Why,  
To be a woman, a sown field.

Let us  
Attribute a significance perhaps  
Not ours to what we are compelled to be  
By being it:

as privately forestall  
The seed's necessity by welcoming  
The necessary seed;  
likewise prevent  
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 all 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 —

For fear my body should 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 —











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The pot of earth

