

Ars Poetica | Poetry Out Loud

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By Archibald MacLeish

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

*

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

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Source: *Collected Poems 1917-1952* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1952)

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Poet Bio

Archibald MacLeish was born in Glencoe, Illinois, and attended Yale University where he was a member of the Skull and Bones secret society. After college, he enrolled at Harvard Law School, but he put his studies on hold to become first an ambulance driver and later a captain of artillery during World War I. He graduated from Harvard in 1919. MacLeish’s long and prestigious career includes several years practicing law, writing and editing for Fortune



magazine, and a five-year stint as Librarian of Congress. He received numerous fellowships, grants, honorary degrees, and awards. He won three Pulitzer Prizes, including one for his verse drama, *J.B.* [See More By This Poet](#)
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