



**SPOTLIGHT ON**

## Everyday Poetry: Anglo-Saxon Riddles

translated by **Burton Raffel**

In the Anglo-Saxon period, riddles were “everyday” poetry and intellectual exercises that entertained by puzzling. Like riddles in most cultures, the Anglo-Saxon riddle can be crude; it usually describes some household or farm object or some aspect of ordinary life. Ninety-five riddles are found in the Exeter Book.

The Anglo-Saxons must have whiled away many a long, dark winter evening by repeating riddles like these and having friends guess the answers. The answer to each riddle is below.

32

Our world is lovely in different ways,  
Hung with beauty and works of hands.  
I saw a strange machine, made  
For motion, slide against the sand,  
5 Shrieking as it went. It walked swiftly  
On its only foot, this odd-shaped monster,  
Traveled in an open country without  
Seeing, without arms, or hands,  
With many ribs, and its mouth in its middle.  
10 Its work is useful, and welcome, for it loads  
Its belly with food, and brings abundance  
To men, to poor and to rich, paying  
Its tribute year after year. Solve  
This riddle, if you can, and unravel its name.

33

A creature came through the waves, beautiful  
And strange, calling to shore, its voice  
Loud and deep; its laughter froze  
Men's blood; its sides were like sword-blades. It  
swam  
5 Contemptuously along, slow and sluggish,  
A bitter warrior and a thief, ripping  
Ships apart, and plundering. Like a witch  
It wove spells—and knew its own nature,  
shouting:  
“My mother is the fairest virgin of a race  
10 Of noble virgins: She is my daughter  
Grown great. All men know her, and me,  
And know, everywhere on earth, with what joy  
We will come to join them, to live on land!”

47

A worm ate words. I thought that wonderfully  
Strange—a miracle—when they told me a crawling  
Insect had swallowed noble songs,  
A night-time thief had stolen writing  
So famous, so weighty. But the bug was foolish  
Still, though its belly was full of thought.

Answers: 32. a ship; 33. an iceberg; 47. a bookworm.