

Sumerian clay tablet, ancient Babylon:

You went and took the enemy's property;
The enemy came and took your property.

Anglo-Saxon Riddles (trans. Craig Williamson):

- #23: I am a wonderful help to women,
 The hope of something to come. I harm
 No citizen except my slayer.
 Rooted I stand on a high bed.
 I am shaggy below. Sometimes the beautiful
 Peasant's daughter, an eager-armed,
 Proud woman grabs my body,
 Rushes my red skin, holds me hard,
 Claims my head. The curly-haired
 Woman who catches me fast will feel
 Our meeting. Her eye will be wet.
- #32: I saw close to the houses of men
 A strange creature that feeds cattle.
 By tooth-hoard and nose-haul
 (A useful slave) , it scruffs the ground,
 Scratches at plants, dogs walls
 Or drags fields for plunder – seeks
 A crop-catch and carries it home.
 Its prey is bent stalk and weak root;
 Its gift is firm grain and full flower
 On a glittering plain – growing, blooming.
- #35 I saw a creature with its belly behind
 Huge and swollen, handled by a servant,
 A hard, muscled man who struggled so
 That the bulge in its belly burst through its eye:
 Its passion – gorge and spill through death,
 Then rise and fill with second breath
 To sire a son and father self.
- #45 A moth ate songs – wolfed words!
 That seemed a weird dish – that a worm
 Should swallow, dumb thief in the dark,
 The songs of a man, his chants of glory,
 Their place of strength. That thief-guest
 Was no wiser for having swallowed words.

Swedish riddle:

Father's scythe is hanging across mother's Sunday skirt.

Spanish riddle:

I was created on the mountain, and I came to my end at the altar.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

William Blake, "Several Questions Answerd":

What is it men in women do require
The lineaments of Gratified Desire
What is it women do in men require
The lineaments of Gratified Desire

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"Auguries of Innocence":

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage
A dove house filld with doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro all its regions
A dog starvd at his Masters Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State

The Bat that flits at close of Eve
Has left the Brain that wont Believe

The Princes Robes & Beggars Rags
Are Toadstools on the Misers Bags

Alfred Lord Tennyson:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Lewis Carroll, from "Jabberwocky":

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

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Yet what are all such gaieties to me
Whose thoughts are full of indices and surds?
 $x^2 + 7x + 53$
 $= 11/3$.

Christina Rossetti, from *Sing-Song*:

A pin has a head, but no hair;
A clock has a face, but no mouth there;
Needles have eyes, but they cannot see;
A fly has a trunk without lock or key;
A timepiece may lose, but cannot win;
A corn-field dimples without a chin;
A hill has no leg, but has a foot,
A wine-glass a stem, but not a root.

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An emerald is green as grass;
A ruby red as blood;
A sapphire shines as blue as heaven;
A flint lies in the mud.

A diamond is a brilliant stone,
To catch the world's desire;
An opal holds a fiery spark;
But a flint holds fire.

Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!
Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!
Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!
Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.

Emily Dickinson, from # 986:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him – did you not
His notice instant is -

The Grass divides as with a Comb -
A spotted Shaft is seen -
And then it closes at your Feet
And opens further on -

He likes a Boggy Acre -
A Floor too cool for Corn -
But when a Boy, and Barefoot -
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone -

Dorothy Parker, “Resumé”:

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren’t lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

Yours truly:

Ransack this cave for your delight.
My mouth is a lie;
But in my bowels find flash truth's light
Once you squint awry
And stumble right.

Franz Kafka, "On Parables" ["Von den Gleichnissen"]:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross over to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.