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## Against a Wen: An Anglo-Saxon Charm

*Anonymous*

*Translated by Maryann Corbett*

Wen, wen, squat as a hen  
here I forbid you to build or bide.  
North must you go to a town that's near  
Where you've a brother, wretch that you are.

He'll lay for you a leaf at your head.  
Under foot of wolf, under wing of eagle  
or its sharp talon, ever may you shrivel.  
Crumble away like coal on the hearth.  
Dwindle down like a pat of dung

And be withered up like a puddle of water.  
Become as little as a linseed grain  
and less even than an earwig's hipbone.  
Now grow so narrow you turn to nothing.

## Original text

Þenne, Þenne, þenichienne,  
her ne scealt þu timbrien, ne nenne tun habben,  
ac þu scealt norþ eonene to þan nihgan berhge,  
þer þu hauest, ermig, enne broþer.

He þe sceal legge leaf et heafde.  
Under fot polues, under ueþer earnes,  
under earnes clea, a þu geþeornie.  
Clinge þu alsþa col on heorþe,  
scing þu alsþa scerne apage,

and þeorne alsþa peter on anbre.  
Spa litel þu geþurþe alsþa linsetcorn,  
and miccli lesse alsþa anes handþurmes huþeban,  
and alsþa litel þu geþurþe þet þu napiht geþurþe.

This anonymous metrical spell, inserted in a twelfth-century hand in the tenth-century British Library MS Royal 4A xiv, testifies that trust in pagan medical magic coexisted for a long time with Christian faith in early England. Twelve such charms in meter survive in various Old English manuscripts, often accompanied by instructions to use certain herbs, prayers, and rituals.

## About the Translator

Maryann Corbett holds a doctorate in English language and literature from the University of Minnesota. She is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *In Code* from Able Muse Press. Her work has won the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize and the Richard Wilbur Award. Her poems appear in journals on both sides of the Atlantic and on the web pages of the Poetry Foundation and American Life in Poetry. Email: [maryann@corbettdigital.net](mailto:maryann@corbettdigital.net)