[Pearl: A Translation - Pearl: A Translation Poem by Giles Watson (poemhunter.com)](https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/pearl-a-translation/)

The Pearl

i

Perfect Pearl – prince pleaser –  
Clear and clasped in precious gold:  
Orb of oriental pleasure,  
Peerless Pearl, whose pulse turned cold,  
So round, regal, proud and pure,  
Pearl so smooth and cleanly clad:  
I judge the gems, and none compare:  
So still and single, and so sad.  
Alas, she falls – despite all prayers –  
On a grassy grave, in ground to rot,  
I wane and plead, wounded, poor,  
For my precious pearl without a spot.  
  
Since in that spot my pearl sprung  
Its clasp, I’ve kept my vigil well,  
For want of it has wrought such wrong  
That hope and health are never whole,  
And while I watch, my heart is wrung,  
My breaking breast subsides and swells –  
And yet no sweeter song is sung  
As time and torment work their will.  
I float and flounder, faithless while,  
Clad in mud, her blood must clot  
As mould and soil conspire to spoil  
My precious Pearl without a spot.  
  
That spot, where spices should be spread,  
Where riches rot and run to ruin,  
Should bloom black and blue and red  
And shine and shimmer in the sun.  
Fruit and flower should never fade  
Where she lies sunk in clods so dun,  
For grasses grow, though grain seems dead –  
Else wheat would not to harvest run –  
As, out of goodness, good begun,  
So sweet a seed should fail me not:  
I pray that spices soon shall spring  
From that precious Pearl without a spot.  
  
By that spot I stood, as I shall tell,  
And bowed down in an arbour green  
In August at the Lammas bell  
When crooks cut corn, hooked and keen:  
For on this clump, it coiled and fell,  
Shadowed with worts of subtle sheen:  
Gillyflowers, ginger and gromwell,  
And sprays of peonies between:  
Most gorgeous grave there’s ever been,  
And sweeter still, the scent that shot  
Me through with longing. She lives unseen:  
My precious Pearl without a spot.  
  
Before that spot I wrung my hands,  
Caught up in clammy cold and care:  
In hopeless dole my heart was held  
Though reason wrestled for my cure.  
I groaned for her who ground must hold  
Though Christ spoke comfort at my core:  
My wretched will wailed to be heard.  
By flowers I fell – earth held its hoard –  
The perfumes spread; my heart grew hot.  
I drowsed, and dreams swooned my head  
With my precious Pearl without a spot.  
  
2.  
  
From that spot, my spirit springs, as into space,  
My body bound to ground, engrossed in sleep,  
My ghost gone wandering, by God’s grace,  
Questing after miracles – I creep  
As on a strange planet, a perfect place  
Where crags and cliffs cleave canyons deep –  
And towards a flawless forest turn my face,  
Where crenellated castles tower, each keep  
A beacon of bright light which leaps  
Into gleaming glory, elegantly framed,  
Embroidered of woven stone: stark, steep,  
Severe, and splendidly adorned.  
  
Adorned – all the mountainsides –  
With cliffs of crystal, clear, aglow,  
Bound about by woodland rides  
And birch-boles blue as indigo.  
Like burnished silver, each leaf slides  
Against its fellow. On winds they flow  
Agleam with gold; the foliage glides  
On breeze that shimmers as it blows,  
And on the ground, the gravel grinds  
Smooth as oriental pearls, forged  
Of sunbeams set to sear and blind,  
Each sphere splendidly adorned.  
  
Splendidly adorned, those downs so sheer,  
And so my ghost forgets all grief:  
The scents of fruits so fresh and clear  
Would bring a starving man relief,  
And birds fill every branch and briar –  
Their flaming hues light up each leaf.  
Citole and cittern charm the ear  
Yet fail to reflect the splendid life  
And mirth of birds: their wings blithe  
With beating, like a choir warmed  
With gracious, gleeful, delightful breath –  
In praise and plumage splendidly adorned.

ix  
Splendidly adorned – that bright wood  
Where fortune bids me fare forward.  
No tongue can tell it in the world –  
A glory life cannot afford.  
I walk forth willing, my way to wend,  
Not hemmed by hills, and unafraid,  
And far in the forest, fair and wild:  
Pears and spices, plants of the field,  
Hedgerows, meadows, and rivers undefiled,  
Each gilded bank unfurling like a frond,  
With snaking shores softly ferned.  
Lord! It is splendidly adorned!  
  
The adornment of those splendid deeps:  
Beautiful banks of beryl, bright  
As sun. Swirling, sweet water sweeps  
With whisperings so soft and slight  
Over shimmering stones – it weeps,  
Glows, glints like glass in light,  
As stars stream with splendour when we sleep –  
Stars which wink on a winter’s night –  
And pools each pebble with delight,  
As an emerald or sapphire sweetly formed,  
Glazed in laughing streams of light,  
Perfect, and splendidly adorned.  
  
3.  
  
The lovely splendours of downs and dales,  
Of water-meads and wild woods,  
Bring me bliss and quench distress,  
Destroy my pains and heal my wounds.  
Down a stream that flows on dreams  
I move in bliss beyond all words.  
The further I follow those clear streams,  
The more my heart is strongly willed:  
By Fortune blessed, by Fortune wronged,  
Whether soothed by solace, or tested sore,  
The man blown once by her fair wind  
Longs to have yet more and more.  
  
More of joy is in that glade  
Than I could tell in any time,  
For earthly words cannot make good  
A tenth part of those joys sublime.  
Paradise, perhaps, like gleaming gold,  
Lies beyond this bank and stream,  
The one division: deeps that glide  
Where pools are like a mirror’s gleam.  
Beyond the brook, where minnows teem,  
Perhaps a fortress spans the shore,  
But I dare not wade: the waters seem  
Too deep. Yet I long to, more and more.  
  
More and more, and even more,  
I yearn to search beyond the brook,  
For if it is fair upon this shore  
The land beyond has a lovelier look.  
I stop awhile; I search and stare  
To find a ford, but dare not seek  
Too hard, lest danger lies in store –  
Yet the farther I walk by stream and lake  
To hesitate seems a mistake:  
The urge gets harder to ignore.  
Then I see a thing to make  
My mind marvel more and more.

xiv  
More marvels daunt my reason now:  
I see, beyond that mirrored mere,  
A crystal cliff, clear and aglow.  
Radiant rays of light appear  
To rise within it – and sitting below,  
A courtly maiden, her features clear,  
Wrapped in gleaming silks that flow  
About her. I know her. She is dear,  
In glistening gold, shimmering, sheer,  
Shining and fair on the farther shore,  
And long I look, and her so near –  
And longer. I know her more and more.  
  
The more my eyes feast on her face  
And linger over her lissom form,  
Exultant joy strikes with a force  
That floors me as never once before.  
I long to shout – desire is fierce –  
But confusion cleaves my heart with fear.  
To see her in so strange a place  
Stuns my heart: a shock to sear  
Me, when she turns her brow – so dear  
And white as ivory. Then sore  
My heart is skewered with a spear  
Of longing – more and even more!  
  
4.  
  
More I feel a rising fear;  
I stand still and dare not call  
With eyes wide and mouth sealed,  
I stand and halt, as hawk in hall.  
Is there spirit in the one I seek?  
I dread what wonder might befall,  
Yet fear still more she might escape  
If I say nothing to forestall  
Her flight: gracious, without gall  
Or blemish, slender as a bride,  
Rising up in array so royal:  
A precious piece with pearls plied.  
  
Plied with pearls of royal price,  
I swear by grace that I can see  
That girl, fresh as fleur-de-lys  
Step down the bank and gaze at me –  
As white as bliss her linen dress,  
Slit at the sides, trimmed perfectly  
With shimmering margarets – most blessed  
I ever saw – and hanging free,  
Long, sweeping sleeves, exquisitely  
Adorned with pearls along each side.  
Her kirtle also seems to be  
Well-arrayed, with pearls plied.  
  
A pearl-plied coronet crowns the girl:  
Pearls – and not any other stones –  
Each pinnacle of clear white pearl  
A filigree of perfect flowers and spires,  
A circlet studded in a whorl.  
Her wimple closely folds a face  
Grave enough for duke or earl,  
And white as whalebone she seems.  
Like sheer gold her bright hair gleams –  
The tresses on her shoulders ride.  
Her pale complexion has more grace  
Than silk-stitched hems with pearls plied.

xix  
Pearl-plied at her wrists and at each hem,  
And trimmed with pearls about the throat –  
And only pearls – she wears no other gem –  
Her vesture burnished white as holy thought,  
And from her breast there rises, on no stem,  
A wondrous, flawless pearl, plied and thrust  
So artfully my mind turns dry and dim,  
And watchfulness and reason lose my trust,  
Until there is no tongue I’d dare entreat  
To tell it: no mouth has ever tried!  
It rises clean and clear, strung by no thread,  
That precious pearl, so perfectly plied.  
  
Plied with pearls, that precious piece  
Of spice, standing on the opposite shore,  
Leaves no gladder man from here to Greece  
Than I. On the brink, I stop and stare,  
And she, more kin than aunt or niece!  
And so my joy burgeons more and more.  
She opens lips and speaks, that precious spice,  
Inclining low, as is a woman’s pleasure –  
Casts off her crown, that costly treasure.  
I hail her with a laugh, and watch her glide,  
And praise my birth to see a being so pure.  
Sweet she is, who stands, waits, with pearls plied.  
  
5.  
  
“White girl, so plied with pearls,  
Are you the Pearl for whom I weep –  
Object of endless laments and pleas  
For mercy? I watched you slip  
Through my fingers in that mournful place  
And go to grass. I waste, and stoop  
In sorrow – and you: a soul in Paradise!  
You know no strife, are not deprived of sleep.  
What fate stole you whilst I was stripped  
Of hope, and left in grief and danger?  
Ever since fate had us severed,  
I have been a joyless jeweller.”  
  
That jewel, bedewed with pale gems,  
Lifts her face, fixes me in her grey-eyed gaze,  
Replaces her crown with milk-smooth grace  
And solemnly and soberly, she says,  
“Sir, you are making a wild guess  
When you say your Pearl is stolen away,  
When here I am, closed in a gorgeous chest:  
A glorious garden where I laugh and play,  
Freed from all care and released from clay,  
Where loneliness and loss make no clamour.  
You would praise the casket where I lay  
If you were a courteous jeweller.  
  
Gentle jeweller, if you choose to lose  
Your joy to a gem and your love to grief,  
I think you have made the choice of fools  
By making too much of the all-too-brief  
Budding and blowing of a mere rose  
That flowered and failed as sere strips leaf.  
Now, from the chest in which it’s enclosed,  
The Pearl of Price takes meaning and life,  
And yet you call sweet Fate a thief,  
Who plucked you out of failure.  
You blame the medicine for the strife  
And cannot be a courteous jeweller.”  
  
She’s a jewel to me now, that more-than-ghost,  
And pearls drip from every word.  
“My child! ” I cry, “I thought you lost –  
Your voice heals my gaping wound.  
Let my foolishness be confessed:  
I thought my Pearl lost to the wind;  
Now I’ve found her, I am blessed!  
I shall dwell with her in this gleaming wood  
And love the Lord, accept my Weird  
As my sovereign and my saviour!  
Can I cross to you, step out and wade,  
And be a joyful jeweller?  
  
“Jeweller, ” said that gem of light,  
“Are you insane, or do you joke?  
Three things you’ve uttered in my sight,  
Each one choked with devils’ smoke.  
Your understanding stands at nought –  
Your brain has botched the words you speak.  
First, you say, I live because your sight  
Tells you so. Second, you provoke  
God, prating that you would so like  
To live with me, heaven’s interloper.  
Third, you propose to ford this brook,  
But you cannot, foolish jeweller! ”  
  
6.  
  
“I’d say that jeweller deserves scant praise  
Who only believes the things he sees.  
It is blameworthy to be so brazen  
And disbelieve our Lord, who says  
Plainly he has pledged to raise  
You from fleshly death. Hear sense!  
You act as though his words aren’t plain  
Who seeks to save cold reason’s slaves  
By stemming pride at its source.  
But foolish men see truth, and flee,  
And revelation is driven away  
Unless it submits to reason’s decree.  
  
Decree it now, if you dare,  
That you can prate this way to God,  
Deeming yourself fit to dwell here.  
Before you do, I think you should  
Ask permission, for I fear  
You will not pass the bright flood  
That runs between us. Wait, and hear:  
Your corpse must lie beneath a clod –  
Which Adam made corrupt and cold,  
A rank abuse. Till you agree  
To pass through death, dim and drear,  
You cannot cross, by God’s decree.”

xxviii  
“Do you decree, my sweet, ” I say,  
“That I return to grieve and pine?  
What was lost is found today –  
Shall I forego this Pearl of mine?  
Shall I find – to cast away?  
Your words, my Pearl, bring me pain:  
What use is treasure gone astray?  
What is the point of seeking gain  
If losing follows in its train?  
God! Let me fall! Banish me  
From earth! To lose my Pearl again  
Is lasting grief – a cruel decree! ”  
  
“Your own decree brings me distress, ”  
Replied her ghost, “Why hurt me so?  
Too many men lament the less  
Important pains – and then give no  
Thought to calamities. You ought to bless  
Yourself, love God, accept wealth, woe  
And whatever else. Anger wilts like grass.  
You suffer? Then you must see it through.  
Jump up and down – most men do –  
Bleat and bray in your agony,  
Dash to and fro, come or go –  
You must endure your God’s decree!  
  
Go on! Make your decree against Christ!  
He won’t divert a single step –  
And what will you find? A worthless mite –  
Small change. Squander it. It won’t stop  
Your sorrow. Quit this chiding spite  
Against God. Seek mercy. Stoop  
And plead for pity. Bend in his sight,  
That solace, like a dove, may swoop,  
Steal away suffering, bless you, slip  
Off with your sorrow, set you free.  
But rant, rave, or storm off in a strop –  
And you’ll never shift his just decree! ”  
  
7.  
  
To that damsel I decry my sins:  
“Let my Lord take no offense!  
I rave, am rash and make no sense:  
My heart’s bereft, and blind remorse  
Wells up, as water wells from springs.  
I submit myself to providence –  
Relent! Your righteous voice sears  
My soul – and yet no man adores  
You more than I. Be kind, my one source  
Of comfort – your words are spears.  
Take pity, and think of this:  
Sorrow and I are sworn companions –  
You were the ground of all my bliss.  
  
My bliss and burden – you are both,  
And cannot know what it is to mourn:  
You were removed from trials of earth,  
And I have wept, my Pearl long gone.  
I look at you now, and I’m like a wraith,  
For when you were taken, we were one.  
God forbid you turn in wrath  
Now we meet by brook, tree, stone –  
Your trials are not of flesh or bone,  
Though I am dust – the worst there is –  
The mercy of Christ, Mary and John:  
These are the ground of all my bliss.  
  
I see that bliss is now your lot  
Whilst I mourn and face defeat.  
Do you care? It seems not,  
Though I writhe in mortal fright –  
And I, within an arrow shot  
Of you! So tell me – I’m not afraid –  
You who cannot waste or rot,  
How do you live, here in this glade?  
Your high estate makes me glad  
That you are worthy of all of this.  
You’re my joy: the beaten gold  
That burnishes my glowing bliss.”  
  
“Then bliss, Sir, be yours today, ”  
Said the lovely one, lithe and near,  
“You are welcome. Walk and stay  
Awhile. Your words are dear,  
For arrogance drives us away,  
And pride is only hated here.  
My Lord hates to chide the stray,  
Though meek and humble need not fear,  
So when, chastened, you appear  
In his presence, be meek, and kiss  
My Lord the Lamb, and make good cheer,  
For he is the ground of all your bliss.  
  
A blissful life it is I lead:  
You wish to know it, stage by stage –  
You who thought your Pearl had shed  
Her life for death, at tender age –  
And yet I live, and I behold  
The Lamb, my husband, of high parentage.  
I am his Queen, and he my Lord,  
Whose reign is stamped on every page  
Of history. I claimed his heritage  
As his beloved – and I am wholly his.  
His priceless, peerless lineage  
Is root and ground of all my bliss.  
  
8.  
  
“Blissful? ” I cry, “Can that be right?  
Don’t be hurt if I talk out of turn –  
You claim to be the Queen of bright  
Heaven, for whom worlds yearn.  
We believe in Mary, who waxed in light,  
A virgin flower who bore a bairn,  
Whose crown would sear a mortal’s sight,  
Who surpasses all, whose splendours burn,  
Sovereign in her endless reign.  
We call her Phoenix of Araby,  
Who flew flawless from refining flame:  
The Creator’s Queen of Courtesy.  
  
“Courteous Queen, ” says the fair ghost,  
Kneeling on ground and raising her face,  
“Mother and Maiden admired by the host  
Of heaven! Blessed source of grace! ”  
She rises, pauses, speaks at last,  
Her words arched to span the space  
Between us: “Many here strive, and taste  
A just reward, yet none usurps. This place  
The Empress of all heaven takes,  
With Earth and Hell, under regency –  
Yet out of his heritage, she will chase  
No man – the Queen of Courtesy.  
  
The Court and Kingdom of God alive  
Has laws inviolate – one being:  
Every soul who shall arrive  
Is universal Queen or King,  
Foresworn never to deprive  
Another, joyful in others’ having.  
We’d strive to multiply by five  
Each other’s crowns, though no mending  
Is ever needed. My Lady, who toiled to bring  
Jesus forth, is Empress, and rules on high,  
But no one here is rankling:  
For she is Queen of Courtesy.  
  
Of courtesy, says Saint Paul,  
In Christ we’re members equally:  
Head, limb, navel – all  
Parts of his body, loyally  
Striving – and Christ’s nerves call  
Each organ to the Master of Mystery’s  
Service. No guile or gall  
Must tie the limbs, no heart betray;  
The head must neither sneer nor stray.  
This ring on my finger behoves me  
To live and love, bound yet free  
To King and Queen, by courtesy! ”

xl  
“Courteous! ” I cry, “This I believe!  
And charity thrives among your throng!  
My words are hasty – do not grieve –  
My heart would cleave to do you wrong –  
But Queen of Heaven? How can I conceive  
Such things? A Queen, who died so young?  
What greater honour might he achieve  
Who endured the world, steadfast, strong,  
And lived in penance his whole life long?  
What bliss would such investments buy?  
What greater worship might he receive  
Than be crowned by courtesy?  
  
9.  
  
“That Courteous One is too loose of hand,  
If it is true, this thing you say.  
You spent not two years in the land  
Of the living: never learnt to pray  
Or please God with Paternoster, or stand  
For the Creed. A Queen – on the first day?  
How can I trust or understand  
A God who conveniently wriggles away  
From justice? Can his mercy stray  
So far, to elevate a babe’s estate  
To countess, or lady of lesser array?  
He made you Queen? Upon what date? ”  
  
“Does goodness care for dates and measures? ”  
The lovely, ghostly girl enquires,  
“For truth’s in every thing he makes,  
And justice rules all his desires.  
As Matthew’s gospel at the Mass  
Tells you – and any man who hears –  
In a parable. Only fools could miss  
Its moral. Heaven hides in words.  
I reign on high. Here’s how it works:  
A lord has a vineyard. As fate  
Would have it, the fruit of his vines  
Is ripe for harvest: the right date.  
  
His labourers know the date and time;  
The lord arises with the sun  
To hire men to pluck the vine  
And, in the town, engages some.  
They accept his terms: ‘You’re mine  
For a penny a day.’ And so they come  
To the vineyard. They labour in line,  
Plucking and picking with finger and thumb.  
Three hours pass. Other men stand dumb  
In the marketplace. ‘Why do you wait? ’  
He cries, ‘My grapes are ripe! Hurry! Run!  
Do you know the day? Do you know the date? ’  
  
‘We know the date. That’s why we came  
Here long before the dawn, ’ they say.  
‘We stood here watching the sun climb  
And thought there was no work today.’  
‘Go to my vineyard – do what you can! ’  
Says the lord, and pledges their pay,  
Agrees it firmly, man to man:  
‘Your wage is fixed now, come what may.’  
They work the vineyard; he goes his way  
To find more workers. Harvest won’t wait  
For loafers. It is a race against waning day.  
The sun hangs low. Nearly the end of the date.  
  
So the day is dating. It is evensong,  
An hour before the dark comes down.  
Still the lord finds more: idle men, but strong,  
And says to them, not hiding his frown,  
‘Why have you loitered this whole day long? ’  
‘We looked for work – none could be found.’  
‘Go to my vineyard, yeomen! ’ A throng  
Now tread his loamy ground  
As dusky shadows gather round.  
The sun sinks. The hour grows late.  
He pays them all: men of market, town.  
It is done. The end of that date.”  
  
10.  
  
“The date? Only the lord can know  
Who told his purser, ‘Pay my men:  
Give them wages – all I owe –  
Moreover, leave no cause to moan,  
But line them all up in a row  
And give one penny to each man.  
Start with that sloucher who stoops low,  
And finish with the first man who came.’  
But then, the first starts to complain  
And says, ‘We laboured, and are stiff and sore,  
Unlike those wastrels – don’t be mean!  
We think you ought to pay us more!  
  
We have served you more, we say –  
And struggled through the heat –  
Than those who worked two hours today!  
Your pay is counterfeit! ’  
The lord says, ‘My wage won’t wane;  
My workers don’t compete –  
So take your pay, and go away.  
I hired you for a penny, yet  
You mutter calumny and threat.  
Our covenant: one coin. I’m sure  
That’s what we said. What will you get  
By asking me for more?  
  
Is it not – moreover – a lawful choice  
To do my will with what is mine?  
For I play straight – no man cheats –  
The evil is in your mind.’  
‘Thus shall I arrange, ’ says Christ.  
‘The last shall be the foremost man,  
The first the last: the die is cast.  
Few are friends, though I called many;  
Thus the poor gain more than money –  
Though they were late, their worth unsure,  
Their labours barely those of men.  
God’s mercy is worth much more.’  
  
More I have of joy and bliss  
Here in heaven, my life in bloom.  
I’m made a lady, and mark this:  
All heaven moved to make me room.  
I died on earth – it was no curse –  
At evening to the vine I came:  
The Lord paid my wages first –  
Outright – the whole sum,  
Though others in the queue had come  
From toil and sweat on the mortal shore.  
Their payment? They got none.  
They’ll wait for it for years – or more.”  
  
Then more I made my bold complaint:  
“I think your words insane.  
God aids first the weary saint  
Or else his word becomes inane  
Babble. The Psalter makes it overtly  
Obvious – the point is plain:  
Men gain according to desert,  
As the High King must needs ordain.  
A man endures a lifetime’s pain  
And yet you get paid before  
Him? Then loafers are the first to gain.  
They do less work – and earn more! ”  
  
11.  
li  
That ghostly one says, “God is rich:  
We have no fear of more, or less.  
An equal wage is paid to each  
Whether he works most, or least.  
Our noble Chieftain is no cheat;  
His blessings scorn both wealth and loss –  
They pour like water through a ditch  
To wet the vale of all that lives.  
His bargain – though we cringe like larks  
In a hobby’s shadow – is never tough.  
He trades so sinners cannot lose:  
The grace of God is great enough.  
  
Enough objections! You bring me shame  
To say my penny can’t be paid –  
A mere babe the day I came  
And not deserving such reward.  
You know a man, then, whose fame  
Depends upon how well he prayed –  
Who never forfeited any claim,  
And of heaven’s lustre stands assured?  
Strange. I’ve known men. The more they aged,  
The more their deeds grew grim and rough!  
I say by mercy saints are made –  
The grace of God is great enough!  
  
But the innocent have enough grace  
At the very moment they are born  
And baptised. They are grabbed  
From the water, grafted into the vine.  
And when the Day comes, engraved  
With Death, and Night hangs, wan  
And waiting – they, who never wronged  
God – are the ones who gain –  
Paid by the vineyard they were in.  
He rewards their labour out of love;  
Pays them first, and all is done.  
For the grace of God is great enough.  
  
It’s well enough known that man was made  
For perfect bliss – this, Adam,  
Our forefather, forfeited in a mad  
Moment – ate the apple for our doom,  
And out of that meal, all were damned  
To die deprived. We could only dream  
Of Heaven, bound for Hell’s murderous  
Heat – there to dwell, slowly drown –  
But soon enough, the deal was done:  
Rich blood clotted on the Cross so rough,  
And gushing water began to drain  
When the grace of God grew great enough.  
  
Enough grace gushed from that well –  
Blood and water from a gaping wound –  
To buy us all from the bilge of Hell  
And wrench us out of death. We groaned,  
Half drowned from that wound, truth to tell –  
The blade that made it: grimly ground –  
It washed away guilt, and the disgusting smell  
Of Adam, who left us drowned  
In Death. Nothing in the round  
World reeks more of bliss and love!  
Wilfully lost, we wound up found:  
And the grace of God is good enough.  
  
12.  
  
“There is grace enough to save the one  
Who sins afresh – should he repent –  
But grief and sorrow glower upon  
Him, the penance ripping him apart.  
Yet reason cannot yield to wrong,  
And saves at once the innocent,  
For no judgement from God’s throne  
Would chide or purge the pure in heart.  
Contrition, true, may cover guilt,  
And mercy cleanse it in his sight;  
But she whom guile never bent  
Is innocent, redeemed and right.  
  
This is right – I know for sure –  
God will save two kinds of men:  
The righteous man shall be made pure;  
The innocent shall come to him.  
The Psalter says it, and the Law:  
‘Lord, who shall reach, and climb  
Your holy hill? The one without flaw  
Who served you, faithful from the womb,  
Who works for love with every limb,  
Whose heart is as pure as light –  
The righteous one shall not stumble’,  
But the innocent are redeemed by right.  
  
The righteous man, I also know –  
The one who opens the fortress door –  
Never takes life in vain, or blows  
His trumpet in his neighbour’s ear,  
As Solomon’s great wisdom shows –  
And Wisdom is indeed the cure –  
Through narrow straits the wise soul goes,  
And God’s word drives out his fear,  
Saying, ‘Look! Heaven is here!  
It is yours, earned by your plight! ’  
But peril never ventures near  
The innocent. She’s redeemed by right.  
  
Of righteous men, David says  
In his Psalter – you’ve surely heard –  
“God’s judgement falls on him who serves  
And no man living is justified.”  
You’ll come to court at his summons  
When all our cases are cut and dried,  
And though you plead, still your sins  
Will hem you in on either side.  
But on a bloody rood he died  
For this, his hands nailed tight,  
And in your place, he was tried  
By innocence, and not by right.  
  
Let the righteous read. It’s right that he  
Should look upon the Book, and learn:  
How Christ walked in antiquity  
And parents brought him babes and bairns.  
They pray that he will bless and heal  
Their children, and he turns  
To touch them. His disciples howl  
Reproaches, and many are deterred,  
Until he holds up his hand and tells  
Them: ‘Bairns are welcome in my sight,  
And all of Heaven is firstly theirs.  
They’re innocent, and safe by right! ”  
  
13.  
  
“Righteous Christ told his disciples:  
‘There is a Kingdom you’ll never win  
Unless you come as a little child.  
The grown are barred – they’ll not get in.  
The harmless, helpless, undefiled,  
Unspotted by some smearing sin:  
They stand and knock, shy and mild,  
And on its hinge, the door swings  
Wide open. Bliss beckons them within:  
That bliss for which the jeweller searched  
And sold his goods, both wool and linen,  
To buy a pearl so unbesmirched.  
  
That pearl is unbesmirched, so dear  
The jeweller sold off all his goods:  
It’s like a globe of heaven, clear  
As Yahweh’s firmament and flood,  
For it is flawless – crystal clear –  
Round and endless, like the world,  
The jewel of all whose holy fear  
Was cleansing.’ At my breast it glowed –  
My Lord, the Lamb, who spouted blood,  
He set it there, pledged peace, and reached  
Into my heart. Forsake this raging, wild  
World. Buy this Pearl. It’s unbesmirched.”  
  
“You, Pearl, unbesmirched and pure,  
Who wears, I swear, the Pearl of Price,  
What maker formed your fair figure?  
Who made your clothes? – For he was wise.  
Your beauty bedazzles mere nature –  
Pygmalion failed to paint your face  
And Aristotle couldn’t conjure  
Out of words your virtues, grace  
And properties. You shame the fleur-de-lys.  
Your radiant face is angel-touched.  
What oyster opened to unleash  
A Pearl so pale and unbesmirched? ”  
  
“My unbesmirched Lamb amended all, ”  
She says, “Bade me be his bride –  
And I, unworthy of his call  
By worldly rules, could not deny  
Him. I left your dank world – the Fall  
Mouldered it. He blessed me, high  
As Heaven: ‘Come here! ’ I couldn’t forestall.  
‘No spot or stain is to be scried  
In your white skin.’ He gave beauty, swilled  
My clothes in blood amidst his church,  
And crowned, cleansed, acquitted, plied  
Me with pearls – all unbesmirched.”  
  
“Unbesmirched bride who burns like flame,  
Consort to Christ, rich and alive,  
What kind of creature is this Lamb  
Who woos with you and makes you wife –  
And with such competition? How’d you climb  
To lead with him a Lady’s life?  
So many women must come, comb  
Their hair, flutter eyelashes, give strife  
To Christ! D’you have the skill to drive  
Them all away? Don’t they screech  
At you? Are you so powerful and alive –  
A matchless maiden, and unbesmirched? ”  
  
14.

lxvi  
“I’m unbesmirched, ” says that Queen,  
“All of one facet, with no flaw –  
So I say, and so I mean –  
But matchless? No, there are more:  
The Lamb’s wives in company  
Are a hundred and forty-four  
Thousand. The Apocalypse makes it clear:  
Saint John the Divine saw us pour  
Onto Sion Hill, as a tide on shore –  
Saw us, in a ghostly dream,  
Arrayed for wedding: nine score  
Thousand, in the new Jerusalem.  
  
Of Jerusalem I could say more, and spell  
Out in speech things that happened there  
To my Lamb, my Lord, my dear Jewel,  
My joy, my bliss, my love and care.  
You’ve heard the prophet Isaiah tell  
How the meek is mauled in man’s snare,  
Glorious, guiltless. Men stoop to kill  
An innocent Lamb. They stand, stare  
As men lead him off, as if to shear  
A sheep, then slaughter him. He looks at them,  
Clams his mouth against calumny. There,  
Where Romans and Jews judged him: Jerusalem.  
  
In Jerusalem my love was slain,  
Rent on the rood by rude ruffians  
Who bent his back to bear our pain  
Taking a fair clout of our cold felonies  
As they flayed his face, leaving bloodstained  
What once was so fair and fine –  
Who let himself be scourged for our vain,  
Self-centred sins – took a flogging:  
The one who never erred or flinched,  
Crudely crucified on a cumbrous beam  
Of splintery wood: a Lamb, forlorn  
And slaughtered, in Jerusalem.  
  
In Jerusalem, Jordan and Galilee  
Where the good Saint John baptised,  
Isaiah made true his prophecy:  
He went in water with the Christ,  
The words fulfilled, perfectly:  
‘Look! God’s Lamb: a steadfast  
Stone that sin can’t shake! Yet he –  
Who staunched sin for the whole host  
Of earth, and never once compromised –  
Though clean and guiltless, took our blame.’  
And when we lie, or cheat, or boast,  
We kill him in Jerusalem.’  
  
In Jerusalem my loved one bled,  
Twice taken there as a Lamb  
To make true what the prophets said:  
Meek of mind, gentle of limb.  
The Apocalypse describes the third:  
Upon a throne where none dare climb  
Save saints – as the apostle dreamed –  
He saw the Lamb defy the tomb  
And open a book. Angels teemed  
About its seven seals. At sight of them,  
Men cowered, as in a holy storm,  
In hell, on earth – in Jerusalem.”  
  
15.  
  
“Jerusalem’s Lamb bears no tint  
Of any pigment but pure white.  
No spot or stain adheres to it –  
The wool luxuriant and bright.  
Each soul that never bore a spot  
Becomes the Lamb’s stainless wife,  
And there is no place for spite  
Among our thousands – blessed with life:  
Each thousand, multiplied by five,  
Would only make us praise and bless  
The more. In a host, love can thrive  
And wax in honour, never less.  
  
None of us is less in bliss  
Who bears a pearl upon her breast.  
Those whom a spot belies,  
With pearls or crowns are never blessed.  
Although our corpses are clad in clods  
And you are grieving without rest,  
We have new life beyond old loss  
And in one death place all our trust:  
The Lamb our joy, from cares released,  
Moved to delight at every Mass –  
And each bride’s bliss is brightest, best  
Of all – none is honoured any the less.  
  
You give less credence to my tale  
Than you should. Look in the Apocalypse:  
‘I say, ’ says John, ‘the Lamb stands tall  
On Mount Zion, is lovely, and thrives,  
A hundred thousand in his trail –  
Forty four thousand more than this!  
And on their foreheads, true to tell:  
The Lamb’s name, and the Father’s –  
A choir from Heaven uplifts and sings  
Like overflowing rivers, floods  
And thunder rumbling in the clouds –  
A rising clamour, and never less.  
  
Nevertheless, though that shout is sharp  
And though the myriad voice is loud,  
A new sound makes my spirits leap.  
To listen is to love: a great cloud  
Of spirits plucking upon harps,  
The new song clearly declaimed  
In discourse sonorous and steep:  
Harmonies, melodies, undefiled  
Before God’s throne – a flood  
Of song. Four beasts bow and bless;  
The aldermen, the grave and good,  
Sing it loudly, and never less.  
  
Nevertheless, none is so skilled in song  
For all the craft they might possess  
That they could sing the slightest strain  
Of that hymn – except for those  
Of the Lamb’s company, the earth’s slain:  
First fruits, set aside as God’s –  
The Lamb’s treasures, kept from spoiling,  
Like him in colour, clad in clothes  
Of Heaven, dressed in truth and love’s  
Assurance. Their sweet tongues confess:  
Their spotless, indissoluble, heavenly lives  
Are in their matchless Master – never less.’”  
  
lxxvi  
“Nevertheless, I cannot help but thank  
You, Pearl, ” I say, “though I chose  
To question heavenly wisdom with rank  
Worldliness. To Christ’s chamber you arose  
While I floundered in mud and muck,  
And you sprang up so rich – a rose,  
A living bloom on this blissful bank,  
Where delight’s angels never close  
Their eyes on the beauty I must lose:  
My fleeting hind. How can I express  
My worldly thoughts, rough-hewn and coarse?  
Yet grant me one boon, nevertheless...”  
  
16.  
  
“... Nevertheless I call you, loud and clear,  
To see if you will heed my plea,  
My jewel, without a stain or smear,  
And ruefully cry, ‘Humour me! ’  
Where are the battlements so sheer  
To protect you? And your manor? I can’t see  
It anywhere. Is Jerusalem near,  
Where David was enthroned? Does he  
Reign yet in these woods, this tree?  
It’s in Judea, that noble court.  
Since you’re now so blemish-free,  
Your home must have no stain or mote.  
  
That mote-free company who glide  
By thousands, in so thick a throng  
Must need somewhere to reside –  
Some gallery for jewels, held strong  
Against conquest. You cannot live outside!  
Yet by these banks I walked so long,  
Wandering, with eyes held wide,  
But saw no house fit for a King  
Or his ladies. You’re alone, lingering  
To watch this stream, with leaves afloat.  
If you’ve a home, lead me along  
To its gates, across its moat.”  
  
“A moat and city in Judea, ”  
That precious spice said to me,  
“Bore palms as my Lamb drew near  
To writhe and suffer grievously:  
The old Jerusalem – and there,  
Guilt was bound, and man set free;  
But a new Jerusalem is here,  
Founded by God’s embassy,  
The spotless Lamb its emissary.  
He made us citizens of his state,  
And all our eyes can clearly see  
His city, unobscured by motes.  
  
Two moated cities, true to say,  
Are called Jerusalem nevertheless.  
You know the meaning of that name:  
“City of God” or “Place of Peace”.  
In one, our peace was regained –  
The Lamb suffered there, by choice.  
In the other, our peace is claimed –  
It lasts, and will never cease –  
The city to which all make haste  
Once their flesh is laid to rot,  
Where bliss and bounty only increase,  
Its citizens without one mote.”  
  
“Mote-free maid, so mild and meek, ”  
I cry out to that lovely flower,  
“That second city, then, I seek.  
Take me to that blissful bower.”  
The maid says, “That may never be.  
God guards it like a garrisoned tower.  
The Lamb let down the bridge for me,  
Though but a glimpse is great favour.  
You may gaze upon its cloister,  
With luck, but you’ll not set foot  
Inside, or walk its streets, by any power,  
Unless you’re clear of the merest mote.  
  
17.  
  
“You want to see beyond that moat?  
Follow this stream toward its source,  
And though its banks may never meet  
I’ll walk in step with you its course  
Till you reach a hill.” I cannot wait.  
I go beneath boughs beautifully dressed  
In leaves, climb the hill, and what I want  
Is there: a City – the rise traversed  
With joy – beyond the brook, enclosed  
In the vale below. Sun-bright it shines,  
Almost blinding, as it is described  
In the Apocalypse of Apostle John.

lxxxiii  
As John the Apostle plainly saw,  
I see that City, so well renowned:  
Jerusalem renewed! No flaw  
Mars it, as though it has descended  
From open Heaven, burnished more  
Brightly than gold or glass, studded  
With gleaming gems, twelve tiers adorned  
With stones, the whole house burdened  
With jewels. Twelve buttresses tenoned  
And grooved, each tier topped with stone:  
As splendid as the town described  
In the Apocalypse of Apostle John.  
  
John’s scripture numbered and named them:  
These stones – his tally was clear.  
Jasper I notice first – a mottled gem,  
Glinting green on the ground’s tier;  
Second, sapphires spark and gleam  
And white quartz, rosy and pure.  
The third is pearl, white as cream;  
The fourth, emerald, green and sheer –  
I tremble as I venture near –  
And onyx is the dark fifth stone;  
The sixth – the ruby, just as sure  
As the Apocalypse of Apostle John.  
  
John also mentioned the chrysolite:  
A seventh buttress, gold and green.  
The eighth is beryl, clear and white.  
Twin-toned topaz: buttress nine.  
Blue green chrysopraze: ten. Well wrought.  
Orange jacinth: I count eleven.  
Twelve, a salve for any blight,  
Is amethyst, purple, indigo-riven.  
The wall above the tiers? An ocean  
Of yet more glassy jasper, long  
And perfect. I know the description:  
Out of Apocalypse. The Apostle? John.  
  
John described it – I see it there:  
The twelve steps are broad and bare.  
Above them, the City – full square –  
Its breadth and length an equal share.  
The streets? Gold and glass. They glare  
Like egg-white in the candle, clear  
And shining. The houses almost blare  
Their cleanness. The stones all wear  
The same bright sheen – the walls sheer  
For twelve whole furlongs. I stare: it’s gone  
Into the distance. Measure it? I don’t dare.  
I leave that to the Apostle John.  
  
18.  
  
John wrote it; I see much more:  
Each fine facade has three gates,  
Making twelve in the tiered wall,  
Each portal framed with metal plates,  
The gates themselves of perfect pearl:  
The Margaret that never fades,  
Engraved as in scripture: all  
With names of Israel’s bairns, and dates  
To celebrate their enduring fame,  
First to last etched like a rune,  
The streets lit like a shimmering flame  
Requiring neither sun nor moon.  
  
There is no need for moon nor sun:  
God himself their lambent light.  
Their Lamb-lantern floods all with stunning  
Luminosity, the City ablaze, so bright  
I can see straight through house, wall – plumb  
The whole translucent edifice with a sight  
So enraptured that the High Throne, hung  
With adornments, sears white  
My brain, as the Apostle wrote.  
The Self of the High God sits upon  
It; water gushes from it in outright  
Torrents, bright as both the sun and moon.  
  
Sun and moon never shone so sweet  
As that gurgling river from beneath,  
Swiftly rushing through each street,  
Free of slime, gall and earthly filth.  
There is no church. It is complete  
Without chapels or temples. Truth  
Is their minster; God their cathedral,  
The Lamb, their eucharist and oath,  
The gates all unlocked, their girth  
Opening on wide roads, making room  
For more. The besmirched are loth  
To enter bearing any spot, by the moon.  
  
The moon is a paltry light,  
Its body spotty, a globe of grime –  
But here, it is never night:  
It’s futile for the moon to climb  
This sky, to vie with perfect light  
Glinting on the brook’s taut brim.  
The planets whirl – a sorry plight –  
The sun itself turns wan and dim.  
About the brook, trees glimmer,  
Bearing life’s fruit, ripening soon:  
Twelve times a year. It is summer  
With the sickle of each moon.  
  
The moon would blench and wax pale;  
Blood-warmed flesh would not endure  
To gaze upon this wall. I fail  
To comprehend it: perfect, pure.  
I stand dazzled as a flustered quail,  
Amazed by its frailty – this lack of flaw –  
A pale vacancy of pain or travail –  
And am ravished by this radiant, gorgeous  
Absence of taint. I know for sure  
No mortal man can endure this boon.  
No quack in Christendom could cure  
Him: his life forfeit, under the moon.  
  
19.  
  
Just as the rising, marvellous moon  
Drives the ebbing day-gleams down,  
It shakes the very soul of man  
To know this City – of rich renown –  
Is thronged with retinues of women:  
All virgins, wearing the same gowns,  
Answering the same unseen summons  
As my own bejewelled and blissful one –  
And all of them are likewise crowned,  
Dripping pearls, and draped in white.  
In each one’s breast is firmly clasped  
A blissful pearl of great delight.  
  
In great delight they glide together  
On golden, glinting, glassy roads;  
A hundred thousand of them gather,  
All rigged out in matching robes,  
Each as radiant as the other.  
The splendid Lamb before them rides  
With seven horns – a lather  
Of priceless pearls encrusts his clothes,  
And without clamour, the virgins close  
In upon the throne, their ranks all white.  
Like maidens at Mass, they rise in rows,  
Pouring forth with great delight.  
  
The delight the Lamb’s coming brings  
Is too intense for me to tell:  
The aldermen, when he arrives,  
Swoon at his feet. No pen could spell  
Out how that angel-legion throngs,  
With thuribles, the delightful smell  
Of incense eternally on the rise,  
And for that Jewel, their praises swell:  
They quake the Earth and cleave Hell.  
The virtuous orders of angels smite  
My heart. I long to sing as well,  
And lose my soul in their delight.  
  
Delighting in the Lamb, I reel,  
Rapt in wonder. Just out of reach  
He seems: more regal and real  
Than prophets could spell out in speech,  
His garments all glorious, the seal  
Of graciousness upon his face. I search  
With wild eyes the wound that spills  
His heart’s blood, in a great gush,  
The skin so torn. I swoon and lurch,  
Sick to think that sin and spite  
Thrust in the spear and raised the lash.  
Can men do this, and take delight?  
  
And yet, delight is on his face  
Despite that open, gushing sore:  
The agony has left no trace  
On his expression – an exultant stare.  
Around him, his retinue of grace,  
Lambent with life, enough to sear  
My eyes. And there, looking utterly in-place,  
My little Queen. Did she stand near  
Me in that glade? Christ! I can hear  
Her laughter, mingling with the mass, all white.  
I must wade these waters, face my fear  
With love, and longing for delight.

xcvii  
20.  
  
Delight besieges me in eye and ear,  
And madness begins to melt my mind.  
I see my Pearl – yearn to be near.  
Beyond the water, and left behind,  
I pace, and in my pain, forget all fear.  
Nothing can knock me back or bind  
My need, prevent my plunge into the stream:  
I’d swim its breadth, even if I died!  
But fate has means of drowning the deeds  
Of men. I leap, longing to splash  
Into the brook, and am denied.  
It is not as my Prince would please.  
  
It does not please him that I should throw  
My frenzied form in that bright flood  
And rashly flounder in its flow.  
I run, leap – and am deftly floored,  
For just as I spring, a glancing blow  
Strikes me. The Dream takes flight,  
So I awaken, grovelling low  
In that arbour, on the fragrant-flowered  
Mound, my head pounding as the petals blow  
Where once I watched my bright Pearl go  
To ground. Prostrated in this mournful place,  
I admit, though I barely want to know,  
“All is as my Prince would please! ”  
  
It doesn’t please me to be banished  
From that fair kingdom, with only the moon  
To replace the glories which have vanished.  
Yearning churns me. I long to swoon  
Once more. I roar out with a ravaged  
Voice, “Oh, my Pearl! There never was a boon  
So beautiful as your soft-voiced  
Reproof! And that vision is gone  
Forever: truths I quailed to look upon.  
You are crowned, vaunted, plied with pearls!  
Then I’ll go on in this dungeon, and never moan,  
And dwell here as long as my Prince should please.  
  
Had I always shown pleasure in my Prince’s will  
And yearned no more than he allowed,  
And been content in good or ill  
As my Pearl pleaded – had I not been proud –  
Then God might have kept me, to fulfil  
Mysteries that lie under shrouds.  
But always, men choose luck, and kill  
Grace dead. Once give them ground  
And they want more, until the whole round  
World is in their clutches. I paid the price:  
Cast out of Heaven! We groan out loud  
And grumble, when our Prince is pleased!  
  
A Christian easily does it all –  
Bows to the Prince and is reconciled –  
And he is true, although we fall:  
A friend of even a petulant child,  
Yet God and Lord.” I choke and stall  
At this mound, my Pearl not cold  
Inside it, but a bright Bride, called  
Of Christ: a miracle proclaimed  
Each time bread and wine are clasped  
In a priest’s hand – and only these  
Remain. We’re chattels of the crucified,  
His precious pay in pearls - and Christ is pleased.  
  
Amen. Amen.

[**Giles Watson**](https://www.poemhunter.com/giles-watson/)

 Tuesday, August 27, 2013

**POET'S NOTES ABOUT THE POEM**

First – and most obviously – Pearl is a poem about grief. It is this more than anything else which bridges the gulf of more than six hundred years which separates us from its fourteenth century author, about whom we know so little. He wrote in a Staffordshire dialect of Middle English, could read Latin well enough to make extensive references to the Vulgate translation of the Bible, and was almost certainly the author of two didactic religious poems (Cleanness and Patience) and of one remarkable chivalric romance (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight) with which Pearl is bound in the pocket-sized, naively-illustrated illustrated manuscript which is the only surviving mediaeval copy of his work. It seems probable – and not at all unlikely in an age when infant mortality was far more common than it is today – that he lost a child at a very young age, and that there is therefore an autobiographical element to this poem. Its main protagonist seems at times to be crazed with grief, so much so that when he sees his dead child resurrected as a young woman and crowned as a Bride of Christ, he is unable to control either his sense of incredulity, or his desire to remain with her in Paradise. The representation of grief is warm and loving, but the poem is also remorseless in its portrayal of the impassable gulf which ultimately separates the worlds of the living and the dead. Only a stream divides the Dreamer from his beloved Pearl, but it is inevitable that he will never cross it – and she seems content to keep her distance.  
  
Second, it is a poem about perfection. The Dreamer first experiences a vision of his resurrected child, and is stunned by her perfection. She leads him to the borders of the perfect city, the New Jerusalem, and inside it, he can not only see the perfect Lamb and the throne of God, but a hundred thousand other resurrected women, all as perfect as his Pearl. The pearl itself is the poem’s central metaphor. It is envisaged as a perfect sphere, without flaws, just as his Pearl and her Lamb are also spotless. The poet writes in an age when mystics and contemplatives actively sought a sanctified perfection in this life, but insists on the absolute perfection of the life to come. The genius of his vision lies in the fact that he chooses to make the perfection of the pearl his inspiration for the structural device which shapes all twenty sections of the poem. A pattern of concatenation ensures that in each section, the first and last line of each verse hinges on the same word, which often has different meanings in different stanzas. The last word of one section is then repeated in the first line of the next section, and the final word of the first line of the poem is repeated in its last. Beyond this, there are endlessly intricate interconnections which bind the poem together in its own seemingly spherical structure. A good case could be made for the argument that it is indeed the most structurally perfect longer poem in the English language. The whole exercise might seem like hubris, were it not for the fact that the poet has achieved his objective.  
  
It is also a poem about the tension between faith and reason, vision and verification. The Dreamer swoons with grief on his Pearl’s grave, seemingly inebriated with the scent which emanates from the flowers which grow out of her body. Is what follows a divine vision or a hallucination? His whole interaction with the heavenly realm is a dream, in the midst of which he holds a sustained rational discourse on matters of faith with the spirit of his dead child. He sees her with his own eyes, but cannot touch her. Later, he sees the wound in the side of the resurrected Christ, but cannot, like the doubting Thomas, stick his hand into it. When he seeks these final verifications in the only way open to him – by throwing himself into the stream and trying to swim across – he is thwarted by a return to earthly consciousness. It is this tension which makes the poem compelling for both the theist and the agnostic, and it is a tension which is no less vexing in the twenty-first century than it was in the fourteenth.  
  
In making this translation, I have been guided by the following principles. The original poem is alliterative, but not slavishly so; I have emulated this, but the alliteration is more sparse than in the original, and is sometimes augmented with assonant or consonant patterns. I have preserved the rhyme-scheme of the original, but have softened it somewhat by employing a combination of full-rhymes and pararhymes. Sometimes, I have allowed the rhyming sounds to shift in the space of a single stanza in a way which would have seemed unusual to the author of Pearl, but which seems quite natural to readers of modern poetry. I have retained the concatenation in whatever way I felt best served to communicate the original meaning. The Pearl poet is not punctilious in his application of metre or syllabics; nor am I. Despite the seriousness of its subject, the poem is not devoid of humour; I have retained it, and where the joke is based on a pun, I have done my best to give an impression of the wordplay. Tense is nearly always a vexing question for would-be translators of any Middle English text. Tense-shifts are common in Middle English, and often serve to add drama to an oral delivery, but they seem awkward when translated directly into Modern English. Because the subject of the poem is so immediate, and because the dream itself is so vivid and transitory, I have chosen to render the entire poem, from the point at which the dream begins, in the present tense.  
  
In order to avoid any influence other than that of the Pearl poet himself, I have not consulted any modern translations, although several excellent ones exist. My sources are Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron’s The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, and A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson’s Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Any readers wishing to experience the poem in Middle English are advised to consult the former, which is equipped with an exhaustive glossary. If this translation inspires a single person to do so, it will have achieved its purpose.  
  
  
Narrative summary:  
  
The Dreamer loses his Pearl in a grassy mound - evidently her grave. He swoons with grief, and awakens in an earthly paradise, through which there runs a beautiful stream. The land on the opposite bank seems even more beautiful. He wanders further down the stream, hoping to find a bridge or a ford. Just when he starts to become afraid of the dangers that may be in store for him, he sees a young woman sitting at the foot of a crystal cliff on the opposite bank, and instantly recognises her as his lost Pearl. He hails his Pearl and expresses his relief that she still exists, but she begins to reprove him for his lack of faith. She criticises him for only believing that her soul is immortal now that he can see her, and is shocked by his suggestion that he - a mortal man - has a hope of joining her in Paradise without first experiencing death.  
  
He tells her that for him to walk away from her now that he has found her again would be to suffer a fresh bereavement. She replies that it is divinely decreed that he cannot cross over to her. The Dreamer pleads with his Pearl to accept that his rash questions were borne out of his great grief, and asks her to describe her life in Paradise. She relents, and tells him that she is crowned Queen of Heaven, and is married to the Lamb. The Dreamer is shocked by this assertion. He says that he thought only the Virgin Mary was Queen of Heaven. Pearl replies with a description of a-semi egalitarian heaven in which all inhabitants are kings and queens, and asserts that although Mary has pre-eminence, none of those in heaven would ever question it, because she is so “courteous”. She cites the Pauline notion that the church is the body of Christ in support of her claim.  
  
The Dreamer is even less convinced than before. He wonders how she can have been instantly crowned a Queen of Heaven when she was on the earth for less than two years. She replies at length, citing the parable of the labourers in the vineyard as justification for her rapid advancement in the kingdom of Heaven. She continues to retell the parable, and concludes by insisting that like the workers who worked less than two hours in the vineyard, she was first in line for God’s reward when she reached Heaven. The Dreamer cannot understand. Surely, he argues, those who have endured a lifetime’s pain and temptation must have precedence. She responds that those who die as children die innocent, whereas those who have lived longer are more likely to be tainted by the world, and argues that the Dreamer is underestimating the grace of God. She continues by expounding a series of Biblical texts on the theme of righteousness and justification, culminating with the scene from the gospels in which Christ welcomes the children, and reproves his disciples for attempting to repel them. She continues to expound on this theme, reminding the Dreamer that Christ insisted that one must become like a little child in order to approach him.  
  
The Dreamer admits that she is stupendously beautiful, but wonders how she can have won the title of Queen and bride of Christ, in the face of stiff competition: all those other women who have gone to heaven. Her reply draws upon the Old Testament prophets and the Book of Revelation: the Lamb which was slain in Jerusalem will return to govern the New Jerusalem as its King, with a company of a hundred and forty-four thousand wives – one of whom is the Pearl. She describes the state of bliss experienced by all the brides of the Lamb, and the worship that is offered to him. The Dreamer asks her for a boon: he wants to see the heavenly city or fortress where she lives. She describes the spotless city of the New Jerusalem, and he is so entranced by the glory she describes that he repeats his request to be taken to see it. She grants his request, even though he will not be able to set foot inside the city, and he follows her upstream until he can see the heavenly City. At first, he cannot lift his eyes beyond the twelve tiers at its base, each one wrought of precious stones – with the exception of one, which is fashioned out of pearl. Now, he begins to look up at – and through – the City itself, awed beyond belief by its beauty. He realises that no mortal could ever enter the city and survive its sublime excess – and sees a throng of a hundred thousand and more women, all dressed and jewelled like his Pearl, approaching the throne of God in the company of the Lamb.  
  
He is so driven by his desperation to be with his Pearl, and to participate in the worship of the Lamb, that he resolves to throw himself into the stream that divides him from the City, and swim across it, but as soon as he does so, he awakens from his dream, and finds himself lying prone on the Pearl’s grave. He reconciles himself to his life in the world without her, now convinced that it is the Lamb’s will.