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# Pearl

**The Pearl Poet**

**Late fourteenth century, Middle English**

Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye · to clanly clos in golde so clere · oute of Oryent I hardyly saye · ne proved I never her precios pere – Precious pearl, loved by princes to clasp in gold − she was from the Orient I would venture, nor did I ever find her equal, so round, so smooth and so small were her sides, so lovely in every way. She was unique. But alas! I lost her in a garden. It fell through the grass into the soil and now my perfect pearl has broken my heart.

I have often stood here alone, numb, my heart throbbing painfully, wishing back that jewel that made me so happy. Yet, since it fell from my hands, I can think of no more beautiful music than the peaceful silence of this garden. And it conjures many lyrics into my head to think of her beautiful form lying in the ground. Oh soil around my perfect pearl, you blemish a fine gem. There are blue forget-me-nots, gromwells and red and black poppies glinting in the sunlight. It *is* right that such beautiful flowers should grow where beauty lies rotting in the ground, for flowers and fruit are not destroyed when they fall at last into the soil and each blade of grass grows back from a dead seed, otherwise how could any wheat make its way into a granary? Every seed comes ultimately from another seed, every bean from another bean and such a lovely bead as my perfect pearl cannot be barren, these flowers are so beautiful!

I entered this garden on a holy day in August, when the corn was ready to harvest. Here lived this precious one, my perfect pearl. My pearl had rolled into a mound, shaded from the sunlight by fragrant plants, by carnations to express love, ginger to preserve, peonies to heal, and they looked wonderful, and their fragrance was beautiful. Gripped suddenly by a lonely grief, I reached out a hand towards this mound, my heart in torment; I could seek comfort in Christianity but I wanted to find an understanding based upon firm reason. Thoughts whirled around in my head, fighting with one another as I lamented the pearl that was imprisoned in this mound. And although I knew of the nature of Christ, my thoughts wrestled so earnestly within me that I collapsed into the flowers, where such a fragrance overcame me that I fell asleep at once, above my perfect pearl without a spot.

From this spot, my spirit sprang to somewhere, I know not where, but while my body lay dreaming upon this mound I was taken on a marvellous adventure. I have no idea where in this world it was that I was taken to but I could see cliffs and gullies and I turned my face towards a forest where there were some magnificent rocks. The light coming from these cliffs was unbelievable! The sides of the hills were fashioned with edifices of crystal that shone like glass. And there amongst these woodlands were tree trunks that were as blue as indigo with leaves of shining silver in thick profusion, shimmering as though hot coals were being reflected from their surfaces. The stones upon the ground were pearls whose glistening surfaces made the sun look dim in comparison. This shining adornment was more magnificent than any tapestry or embroidery.

The sight of these beautiful hills made my spirit forget all its unhappiness. Birds flew about in this woodland, their plumage radiant and their songs together so lovely that no lute or cittern could ever reproduce such a melody. The fruit growing there was beautiful and everything in this woodland was so splendid that no tongue can describe it properly. I walked cheerfully about and no bank was so steep that it caused me any difficulty to climb. And the further I walked the more marvellous everything became, the meadows, the fruit trees, the shrubs and plants, the hedges and the borders and the beautiful streams, winding through the forest like gold thread. I followed one of these and came at last upon a river that cut through this forest and Lord! − those lovely deeps were set off by banks of solid beryl! Water swept past with a murmuring voice and on the riverbed were stones that shone as though they were being viewed through glass, shining like the stars on a cold, winter night. Each pebble in its pool was an emerald or a sapphire or another beautiful gem and all the water glistened with its own light, so precious was this adornment.

The adornment of forest and hillside filled my heart with joy, the rich valley and water meadow and the beautiful streams took away all my sorrow, soothed my distress and put an end to all my pain. I followed this flowing river as it sped along its course, and the further it led me into these watery vales, the greater was the happiness that grew in my heart. Wherever Fortune casts her gaze, whether to bring sorrow or joy, it keeps on coming and so did this, more and more. Delight followed upon delight and kept on coming, more than I can begin to describe! An Earthly heart like mine is not able to tell the tenth part of it. I thought that I was looking across this river towards Paradise. I thought that the water might be a way of partitioning joys and that beyond this river, in another valley perhaps, or on a far hillside, lay the city or the habitation that controlled this land. But the water was so deep that I could not wade across, although my desire to do so grew and grew.

At last, I yearned to see what lay on the further shore, for although it was so lovely where I was, it looked to be more beautiful still on the other side, so I kept my eyes peeled, hoping to find a ford or some place to cross. But the more I followed this river upstream, the more perilous the water seemed to become, although I persevered, for I knew that I should not hesitate before such a prize as this. But then something captured my attention and sent my senses reeling, for I saw beyond the cascading water, on the far shore, a cliff of crystal, shining and resplendent, shooting rays of blinding light, and at its foot sat a child, a fine-looking maiden, dressed debonairly in a shining white dress. I knew her well. I recognised her. She shone like gold beneath this cliff and I stared and stared at her and as I looked, I became more and more certain and felt a glorious rejoicing, a happiness that until that moment had entirely gone from my life. I wanted to call out to her but found myself hesitating in embarrassment. I did not want to do the wrong thing and look foolish in front of her in this marvellous place. But then she raised her head and I could see that her face was as white as ivory. My heart missed a beat and I became more and more confused.

More and more, I stared at her with a mixture of elation and fear, as motionless as an owl in an aviary, thinking that I might be watching a ghost and fearful that she could melt away before I had a chance to speak with her. But then this gracious and perfect creature, so smooth and so petite, rose suddenly in her royal attire and I could see that she was covered in pearls. She moved down to the water’s edge, a precious person adorned in royal pearls, dressed in white clothes that were as fresh as a lily. Her outer garment was open at the sides and decorated with the most beautiful pearls that I think I have ever seen. Her sleeves were large, set with a double row of these white gems and her gown was of the same, covered in pearls.

This girl wore a crown upon her head, a crown of pearls and no other jewels, with pinnacles of pearl each carved into perfectly-formed flowers. She wore nothing else upon her head but a wimple of white linen encircling her face, a face which looked stern and as white as whalebone. Her hair cascaded freely down onto her shoulders and shone like burnished gold.

She wore a deep collar that was covered with pearls sewn onto white embroidery, and her cuffs and hems were embellished with pearls − pearls were over her wrists, at her sides and at every opening! Pearls and nothing else! All her clothes were white, and in the middle of her breast shone a prefect pearl, one that no man could ever forget. I don’t think that any tongue could properly describe it, it was so clear and pure and white, this perfect pearl in the middle of her breast.

She came down to the shore on the opposite side of the river and there was no happier man in the world than I when she reached the water’s edge. She was nearer in blood to me than aunt or niece! I was delighted when she curtsied, took off her crown and hailed me in a light, pleasant voice and as the happiest man alive I answered her greeting and spoke to this sweet girl clothed in pearl.

‘Oh pearl, clothed in pearls!’ I said joyously. ‘Are you *my* pearl? I have missed you so! Since you slipped from my grasp into that grass and were taken from me, I’ve longed so much to see you again. My heart was broken, but here you are, living a life of bliss in Earthly Paradise without a care in the world! What sort of fate has sent my jewel here while I’ve languished in sorrow and suffering, a grief-stricken jeweller who has lost his pearl?’

That pearl then, in her fine gems, looked at me with her grey eyes, placed the pearly crown back upon her head and called back to me: ‘Sir, you have not spoken the truth when you say that your pearl has been taken away from you, that is so perfectly enclosed within its wooden box, as in this beautiful garden, to remain forever and to spend its time where there is no lack and no sorrow. Here is a strongbox for you, in faith, were you a noble jeweller. And if you should lose all joy for a single gem that is dear to you, I would think you a foolish jeweller indeed, to let such a small thing upset you so. For what you have lost is but a rose that flowers and dies, following the natural course of things. The nature of a wooden box is that it closes and protects, and you have called your fate a thief, that caused you to come into being out of nothing, so blaming the remedy for your ailment! You are no natural jeweller.’

Her words were a jewel to me indeed, and pearls the things she said.

‘I know only one thing, my darling,’ I replied. ‘Your presence here relieves me of all my sorrow. Please excuse me. I thought my pearl had been lost, but now I have found it safe and secure and I shall live with it in these bright woodland groves. I shall love my Lord and all his laws, he who has brought me to these borders of Paradise, and if I were standing on that far bank of the river beside you I would be joyful beyond words.’

‘Jeweller,’ replied this perfect gem. ‘You have said three foolish things in one breath. Why do you joke? You imply that you believe that I am in this valley because you can see me here. Then you say that you will stay with me in this land, and that you will cross over this river to get to me, but no jeweller can possibly do either of these things.

‘I hold that jeweller to be worth little praise who believes everything that he sees, and much to blame if he thinks that Our Lord would lie to us when he faithfully promised to raise us from the dead, although nature decrees that our body should rot. You set his words askew when you believe nothing but what you can see with your own eyes. It is a failing of pride that ill-befits a good man, if he judges no story to be true unless he can prove it to be so through his own judgment and experience and understanding. Ask courteously for this understanding, in the way that a man should when he speaks with God. You say that you will remain in this place. I think you ought first to ask permission. And you might not receive the answer you hope for. Then you say you wish to cross over this river; but your body must first become cold and sink into the earth, for this place was lost to mankind when our forefather Adam sinned in the garden of Eden. It is necessary for everyone to pass through dreary death before Drighten will permit him to cross this river.’

‘Then you destroy me!’ I cried. ‘I’ve found what I had lost! Shall I give it up now without a fight? To find something only to lose it again so quickly is the surest way to sorrow!’

‘What you are feeling is simply the pain of separation,’ replied this beautiful creature, consolingly. ‘But worrying yourself unnecessarily over a small loss often causes a greater loss. You would be better to cross yourself and love God, for anger will not help you in any way at all. Patience heals. Raging never helps. Although you may struggle like everybody else to try to understand, when your come to an insurmountable obstacle, you can only wait and accept what God shall ordain. Pray to God for understanding, for he will not deviate a single foot from the path that he has chosen. Your own ideas count for nothing, however much distress they may be causing you, so give up the struggle. Seek God’s mercy swiftly and eagerly. Your prayer may cause him to take pity upon you and let mercy work her magic. He may bring you comfort, for whether you lash out blindly or withdraw into yourself, all lies with him to fashion and choose.’

Choosing my words I said: ‘I don’t mean my Lord to become angry with me. If I speak impetuously it is because my head is in a spin, like water bubbling out of a spring. I’ve always put myself in his mercy, so don’t rebuke me with stern words, my precious darling, but show me your own mercy, for you introduced me to true sorrow, you who were once the cause of all my joy. Joy and sorrow, but greater by far has been the sorrow! For I had no idea where my pearl had gone. But now that I can see you are delivered from all danger, my grief has vanished.

‘When we parted we were friends, and God forbid that we should argue together now! I am dirt and have no manners. Christ’s mercy, and Our Lady sweet Mary and Saint John, these are the root of all my joy. But you seem to have no pity for the anguish that I have suffered. You are happy while I remain in doubt and confusion, so have pity upon me and I would ask you, please, to tell me honestly, what is it like, this life that you lead? For I am delighted to see you so healthy and well cared for, and this gives me the greatest joy.’

‘Now may joy come to you,’ replied this beautiful girl. ‘You are welcome to walk around here if your conversation has improved, because I warn you, arrogance and pride are disapproved of bitterly here. My Lord hates disagreement. All those who dwell near to him are meek and submissive. When you appear before him, give all your thoughts to being meek. My Lord, the Lamb, who is the root of all my joy, loves this temperament. Now you say that you wish to understand my life in this blissful place. Well, you know that when your pearl was lost, I was a very young child. But my Lord, the Lamb, has taken me in marriage and crowned me as his queen, so that my joys may be multiplied forever. I shall be his beloved and share in his inheritance. I am wholly his. His worthiness, nobility and excellence is the foundation of all my joy.’

‘My joy,’ I asked, ‘can this be true? Please don’t be cross if I misunderstand you, but are you saying that you are the monarch of the sky, the Queen of Heaven whom all the world should honour? But we believe in the Virgin Mary, the fountainhead of all grace and who bore the child Jesus. Who could remove her crown except through achieving an even greater excellence? Because of her uniqueness we call her the Phoenix of Arabia, who flew flawless from her creator, like the queen of courtesy.’

‘Oh courteous queen!’ exclaimed that lovely child, kneeling upon the ground and screwing up her face in adoration. ‘Virgin mother and happiest of all maidens, blessed progenitor of each and every grace!’ Then she rose up again and, pausing for thought, said: ‘Many of us receive things gladly in this wonderful place, but never at the expense of anybody else. Sweet Mary holds heaven, hell and Earth in her possession and nobody will ever try to drive her from her rightful heritage, for she is the queen of grace and of courtesy. But the court of the kingdom of the living God has in itself the property that all those who arrive do so as king or queen and they would never deprive another of this rank but rather rejoice and wish that others’ coronets were five times as valuable as their own, if this were possible! But my Lady from whom Jesus Christ was born holds governance over us all, and this displeases none of us. For Saint Paul once said that through equality we are all a part of Jesus Christ. As head and arm and leg and abdomen are all parts of our body, so each Christian soul is a limb belonging to Christ. And think whether any hate or bitterness or any envy ever rises up amongst the separate parts of your own body. Does a finger ever get angry or jealous if another finger bears a ring? Well, it is the same with us.’

‘I have no doubt,’ I replied, ‘that you are all very courteous to one another. But, if you will pardon me for saying so, I don’t think that you can be telling me the truth. You raise yourself too highly to claim yourself to be queen when you were so young. What more honour could anyone achieve, perhaps someone who has endured suffering in the name of Christ and lived a life of goodness and penance, sacrificing all the worldly pleasures for the hope of a life in Everlasting Bliss. What more could they hope for than the courtesy of being crowned in heaven?’

‘The courtesy you have received is too generous,’ I continued, ‘if what you say is the truth. You lived less than two years in our world and had no opportunity either to pray to God or to please him in any other way. You learnt neither your Our Father nor your Credo. And made queen on the first day? I cannot believe that God would make such a mistake! A countess, perhaps, or some lady of lesser rank. But a queen! It is too great an honour in so short a time.’

‘There is no limit to his goodness,’ replied this child. ‘Everything that he creates is truth and he can do nothing but what is right, as Matthew says in your Mass. Jesus sets this out for us in a parable. “My kingdom on high,” he says, “can be likened to a vineyard owned by a lord. When the vines needed pruning, the workmen knew perfectly well that the proper time of year for pruning had arrived. The lord rose early that morning, intending to hire workmen for the job. He found some willing to work the day for a penny and off they went into the vineyard, sweating away with great skill and energy, cutting and tying up and making secure. And as the morning wore on, the lord went down to the market and found some other workmen standing about idle.

“Why are you standing doing nothing?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you know what time it is?”

“We’ve been here since dawn,” they all replied, “and nobody has come to hire us.”

“Then go into my vineyard,” said the lord. “I will pay you the going rate for all that you do.” They shook on the deal and went into the vineyard to work. All that day, the lord went about finding more and more workmen to labour in his vineyard until it was nearly evening.

About an hour before the sun was due to set, the lord found some strong young labourers standing about doing nothing.

“Have you been here all day?” he asked. They replied that no one had offered them any work. “Then go to my vineyard and do as much as there is time left to do.”

‘Soon dusk began to descend and the lord knew that it was nearly time to pay all the men for their work.

‘Recognising that it was nearly time, the lord called to his overseer:

“Give all the men their wages now. Pay them what I owe them. And so that nobody can accuse me of unfairness, line them all up and give each of them a penny. First of all pay those whom I hired only a short while ago, then make your way along the line until you come to those I set to work early this morning. But pay all of them the same. Give them all a penny.”

‘When this was done, those who had been working all day began to complain.

“These others have been working only for a short while,” they objected. “We should get more than they have. We were working hard all through the heat of the day, even when the sun was at its hottest, and they have been here for barely an hour in the cool of the evening.”

“My friends, I have not paid you any less than I owe you,” the lord replied. “Take what is yours and go. We agreed that I would pay you a penny and a penny you have received. I have no obligation to pay you any more. Why are you not satisfied?”

‘And this is the way Christ works,’ said this maiden. ‘The first to come to him shall be the last, however much good they have achieved, and the last shall be the first. Poor men will always have an equal share, so although they are small and come late and their efforts achieve little, God’s mercy is much greater than this.

‘So I myself enjoy more happiness, health and high status than all the men in the world might achieve by living perfect lives and receiving a fair judgment. I came into the vineyard late in the evening and my Lord gave me my wages first of all. Everything. Yet there are others who have taken more time, who have worked hard and suffered for many a year, and received nothing. Perhaps they will receive nothing for a long time.’

‘I think that what you say must be wrong,’ I replied abruptly. ‘God is always just, otherwise Holy Scripture is nothing but a load of rubbish! For it says clearly in the psalms, for example, and I hold this passage to be unambiguous: “Lord, you give to everybody what they deserve. Oh High King, you are supreme in judgment.” But the way you describe it, whoever achieves less receives more and the more a man’s achievement is, the less will be his reward!’

‘There is no such thing as more and less in God’s kingdom,’ replied this gentle creature. ‘Everyone receives the same. The gentle Christ pours out his largesse like water streaming through a channel, or like the torrents of a gulf that never stop flowing. His wealth is so huge to those who submit to being rescued that they will want for nothing.

‘You suggest that I have received my reward under false pretences. But as soon as they are born the innocent are plunged into the waters of baptism and brought into the vineyard. Then anon! – the day is shrouded in darkness and a night of death descends upon those who have never done any wrong. The gentle Lord pays his workers. They have responded to his call, they are there. Why should he not be true to his bargain and pay them according to the contract that he has made with them? Have you ever known any man to lower his head so obediently in prayer that he never sinned, or never risked forfeiting the bliss of heaven during his life? Frequently, the older a man is, the further he has strayed into wrongdoing, and it is he who lies most in need of mercy and grace. It is well-known that mankind was first raised into perfect bliss, but then our first ancestor forfeited it, through an apple that he bit into. And because of that morsel of food, man was damned to die in misery and to endure the fires of hell forever. But then came a swift rescue. Precious blood flowed over a rough cross, and life-giving water along with it, for the grace of God was great enough. The blood rescued us from the second death which is the mortifying terror of hell. The water is baptism, which flowed out of the wound left by a sharp spear and that washes away all the guilt that Adam drowned us in. There is nothing in the whole wide world between us and bliss except for what Adam took away from mankind, and this is all restored to us again in that marvellous moment of baptism, through the grace of God.

‘The man who sins may regain this grace, if he repents; but he must beg for forgiveness with suffering and contrition and endure his penance. Logic, though, dictates that the innocent are already saved. God has never given judgment that the innocent should be harmed! The guilty may embrace contrition and be brought to grace through mercy, but the child who has never given sin a second glance is an innocent, and is therefore safe. I know this for a fact. Two sorts of men shall be saved by God: the righteous man shall see his face, and the innocent shall be called to him. As it says in the Book of Psalms: “Lord, who shall climb your high mountain or rest within your holy place?” And the poet answers: “One who has not sinned in this sinful world and whose heart is clean and unburdened.” The innocent are assured of this safety. And the righteous man who does not waste and fritter away his life in vanities, nor try to out-do his neighbour through deception, is certain to approach this stronghold as well. Wisdom will naturally guide him and show him the right path, as Solomon said, and bring him to glimpse the kingdom of God − as if to say: “Look what a lovely isle this is! You may reach it if you are strong.” But the innocent are saved by right.

‘Yet, concerning righteous men, David also says in the Book of Psalms, if you’ve ever seen it: “Lord, do not call your servant to judgement, for no living man is free of blame in your eyes.” So when you come into the court where we shall all be tried, do not plead righteousness, for few can pass that test. He who had his hands and feet pierced and died for us on the cross will grant you entry, when you are tried, by innocence, and not by right.

‘If a man has intelligence, let him read in the Bible how men once took their children to Jesus to be blessed and healed and asked him to touch their children, but his disciples said angrily: “Stop this! Go away!” But Jesus said sweetly: “Let the children come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The innocent are saved by right.

‘My kingdom,’ said Jesus to his disciples, ‘is hard to win unless you come as a child, for this is the only way to enter; guiltless, faithful and uncorrupted, without the stain of any polluting sin. When someone of this description knocks upon the building, the gates shall be quickly opened to them. Here is the bliss that lasts for evermore, that the jeweller sought through precious stones and sold all his possessions for, all his wool and linen, to buy himself a spotless pearl, for which he gave all that he had. This matchless pearl, which the jeweller gave everything he owned for, is like the realm of heaven, as Jesus said, for it too is pure and clean and clear and perfect, endlessly circular and full of motion, open to all who have lived the right way. Look! It rests in the middle of my breast! My Lord, the Lamb, who shed his blood for you, put it there as a symbol of peace. I advise you to reject this mad world and secure your spotless pearl!’

‘Oh spotless pearl adorned with pearls,’ I replied. ‘Who gave you your beautiful shape and clothed you so wonderfully? Nature cannot have fashioned such beauty, nor a fine sculptor your face, and Aristotle could not have analysed any of its properties through logic or metaphysics. Your whiteness exceeds that of the lily. Tell me, darling, what kind of oyster produces such a perfect pearl as the one that lies on your breast?’

‘My peerless Lamb, who saves us all,’ she said, ‘made me his wife, however unlikely this may seem. When I went from your world baptized, he called me to his place of salvation. “Come to me, my sweetheart,” he said, “for you are without blemish and truly clean.” He gave me power and beauty and washed my clothes in his blood before his throne, crowned me a pure virgin and dressed me in spotless pearls.’

‘What manner of thing is this Lamb who would take you as his wedded wife?’ I asked. ‘You climb so high above all others to lead such an honoured life with him, when there are many ladies of high virtue who have given their entire lives to Christ. Can you drive them all away because you are so spotless, and deny them this marriage?’

‘Spotless I am,’ said that merry queen, ‘and forever unblemished, without any fault, but I have not said that I am a queen without equal. We dwell in bliss, all we who are the Lamb’s wives. Saint John the Divine saw a hundred and forty thousand of us in a gathering upon the Hill of Zion once, in a vision, dressed in our wedding clothes on the hilltop that is the city of the New Jerusalem. And I must tell you of Jerusalem if you wish to know the character of my Lamb, my Lord, my dear jewel, my joy, my bliss. The prophet Isaiah has spoken of his meekness and humility: “That innocent man was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and like a lamb taking up the shearing clippers, he steered his own destiny when Jews judged him so harshly in Jerusalem.” My love was slain in Jerusalem. He was torn open by criminals, willing to take upon himself all our suffering and bear all our sorrows. His beautiful face was broken with blows, he sacrificed himself for sins which he had never committed and let himself be stretched out on a cross as meekly as a little lamb. He died for us in Jerusalem.

‘When Jesus went about Jordan, Galilee and Jerusalem, where John the Baptist lived and worked, John gave him a prophesy that accorded with Isaiah: “Lo, you are God’s Lamb for certain,” he declared, “and you will banish away the sins of this world.” Jesus himself never committed a sin, although he took all the sins of the world upon himself and died alone for us in Jerusalem. And so twice, then, was my lover taken to be a lamb in Jerusalem: by the prophesying of Isaiah and by John the Baptist. And therefore it is quite appropriate to see it clearly written in the *Book of Revelation* how Saint John the Divine saw him as a lamb, unclasping a book with finely-trimmed leaves and with seven seals set upon the edge. And at that sight every creature bowed low − in hell, on Earth and in Jerusalem.

‘Every part of this Jerusalem Lamb is pure white, and no stain or blemish can adhere because of the whiteness and abundance of the wool and therefore every soul that has never had a stain, is, to that Lamb, a worthy wife. And every day he takes other wives as well as us, but there is no jealousy or dispute amongst us, and we would love to see five for each one of us who is here now. The more the merrier! Our love thrives in such company and our honour is never diminished. None of us who wears this pearl on her breast can ever lessen the bliss of others, nor would we ever wish to. Although our bodies are buried in the ground and you weep endlessly for us, we know for certain that on only one death alone is all our hope laid − the Lamb makes us joyful, he casts out all our cares and delights us at every feast, and our honour is never reduced. And if you think that I’m not telling you the truth, look in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine where John says: “I saw the Lamb standing healthily and vigorously with a hundred and forty-four thousand maidens, all with the name of the Lamb written upon their foreheads, and his father’s name also. Then I heard a great noise from heaven, as loud as many rivers in flood, or the thunder from a great thundercloud; but it was a beautiful sound and came from the maidens themselves, who were singing sonorous notes with clear and gentle voices. The melodies they sang together before the throne of God and before the four beasts that obey him, and the twenty-four stern elders, were beautiful. They sang without pause, and all who sang were numbered amongst those who follow the Lamb. They have been removed from the Earth as new fruits that belong to God by right, joined forever with the gentle Lamb and are like him in every way, incapable of telling a lie, and can never be parted from him.”’

‘May my gratitude to you never diminish, my pearl,’ I replied, ‘although I question you with some scepticism. I should not dispute with such a noble intelligence, you who have been chosen for Christ’s bedchamber, for I am but a mixture of muck and filth and you are so exquisite, like a beautiful rose, and you live here beside this wonderful hillside where life’s joys may never cease. But I would like to ask you a question, and although I may come across as an ignorant fool, please indulge me nonetheless.

‘I would ask you nonetheless, if you wouldn’t mind − and as you are wonderful and without fault please don’t be offended by this ignorant question − but have you no rooms within a castle wall, no manor where you live and meet with one another? You mention Jerusalem, that royal kingdom where David was seated upon the throne, but Jerusalem doesn’t lie beside these woods. It lies in a noble place called Judea. And this spotless multitude you speak of, thousands upon thousands; so immense a throng must doubtless have a great city to live in, since you are so many! And as you are spotless, your dwelling-place must be perfect too, for such a beautiful wealth of jewels would be hard done by indeed if they had to sleep out in the open! But beside these banks I can see no buildings of any sort. I assume that you have come down alone from some habitation to look upon the glory of this beautiful river. But if there are buildings anywhere, please take me to see them.’

‘The city that you speak of in Judea,’ replied this rare fragrance, ‘is the city where the Lamb chose to suffer for mankind’s sake. It was the old Jerusalem, where the ancient guilt that Adam bequeathed to us was paid for and redeemed. But there are two cities and both are called Jerusalem, for Jerusalem means ‘City of God’ or ‘City of Peace’. In the one place, our peace was made secure because the Lamb chose it to be the scene of his crucifixion. But the New Jerusalem exists through God’s command, where there is nothing *but* peace, and a peace that shall last forever. The spotless Lamb has taken his beautiful flock to it, and as his flock is without blemish, so his city is without stain. That is the place we hurry too when our body is laid to rot − those, that is, who are without blemish. A place where glory and bliss will continually flourish and grow.’

‘Perfect maiden,’ I said to that lovely flower. ‘Please let me visit your blissful home!’

‘God will not allow it,’ she replied, indignantly. ‘You may not enter his high place. But I have obtained permission from the Lamb to let you have a sight of it, as a favour. You may see that shining enclosure from the outside, but you may not take a single step inside. You have no power to enter, unless you are without a stain.

‘To see this city-without-a-stain, you must follow this river upstream. Stay on the opposite side of the bank, and I will keep up with you on this side until you come to a hill.’

I was eager to set off at once and made my way quickly through the woodland, past branches and leaves, and as I scrambled up an incline, a city came into view on the other side of the river. It was dazzling! There were shafts of light that were brighter than the sun, just as Saint John the Divine describes. It was as though it had been lowered from heaven. The city was made of burnished gold, shining like glass the colour of amber, and resting upon foundations of twelve arched tiers of crystal each made from a different gemstone. Jasper made up the first layer, upon which all the others were built, and it was shining green. Sapphire formed the second tier, then chalcedony, pale and shining, without the slightest flaw. The fourth layer was of green emerald, then sardonyx, and the sixth was ruby, just as Saint John the Divine saw in his *Book of Revelation*. The seventh level was of chrysolite, the eighth of clear white beryl and upon this rested topaz with its two colours, then chrosophrase, then jacinth and finally amethyst, sparkling in indigo and purple.

The walls that were built upon these twelve layers of crystal were of jasper that shone like glass, just as Saint John describes. The twelve foundations were broad and ascended steeply in a succession of stairs, and above them stood the city, resting squarely upon them, with streets of gold shining as though they were made of glass, and walls of jasper glistening like a book illustration. The houses within this city were decorated with every kind of precious stone imaginable, and the city itself was perfectly square, each side measuring twelve furlongs, length, breadth and height, as Saint John bears witness − for meten hit syy the apostel John.

As John hym wrytes yet more I syye − And I saw even more of what Saint John writes of, for each side of this city had three gateways, making twelve in all, and each gate was ornamented with a pearl, a perfect pearl with the name of one of the children of Israel written clearly upon it, and the gates followed the order of their birth with the eldest first. And such a light shone from all these streets that they needed neither sun nor moon to see by, for God was their light and the Lamb was their lantern. Through him the city shone brightly, and because of a subtle and transparent clarity possessed by all these walls and spaces I could see the high throne, with the elders and the four evangelists sitting around it, as Saint John describes, and God himself was sitting upon this throne and a spring was flowing out from beneath him, and the water was brighter than the sun. Not even the sun, moon and planets together can be as bright as the copious torrent I saw coming out of that floor, and it rushed through every street in a pure stream.

There was no church anywhere, no chapel nor temple, for the Almighty himself was their minister, and the Lamb their sacrifice, their feast and their Eucharist. And the gates to this city are always open on every side, although no one who bears any blemish may enter. The moon may draw no strength from this city, for she is too spotty and too malformed, and what use would it be for her anyway to go through her cycles in this place where it is never night? Even the sun is far too dim to compete with that brilliant light.

Beside the water are shining trees that produce twelve fruits of life. Twelve times a year they produce glorious fruit and renew themselves again with every moon. Beneath the moon, so great a marvel as the one I felt as I stared into that city no fleshly heart could possibly endure. I stood as still as a dazed quail, numbed by the sheer amazement of it all and ravished by the radiance. For I dare say, in all certainty, that were a person privileged to see this sight in the flesh, even if every cleric alive had him in their care, his life would be lost, beneath the moon − his lyf wer loste anunder mone.

Ryght as the maynful mone con rys − Just as the resplendent moon can rise magnificently before the sun has set, so suddenly, in a marvellous way, I became aware of a procession. This noble city was suddenly full of virgins dressed in a similar way to my own sweet darling. All were crowned, adorned in pearls and dressed in white, and upon each one’s breast was fastened a blissful pearl. The Lamb walked proudly before them in clothes of pearl, sporting seven horns of shining red gold. They walked together on golden streets that shone like glass, hundreds of thousands all dressed in exactly the same way, all of them supremely happy making their way towards the throne; and although there were so many of them, there was no jostling but each walked as reverently as a maiden at Mass. Words cannot describe the joy of the Lamb’s arrival. The elders, when he approached them, fell grovelling at his feet and legions of angels cast the sweet smell of incense about. Then joy and glory was spread out anew and all sung in adoration, so that the sound might have penetrated through the Earth and reached as far as hell itself, proclaiming the joys of heaven!

I felt a great desire to join this multitude in their adoration of the Lamb. He was the best, the first, the finest of all that I had ever heard spoken of. His clothes were so white, his countenance so meek, his spirit so noble; but a wide and weeping wound had torn his body close to his heart. The blood ran down all over his white side. Who could have done this! A heart ought not to find delight but instead burn out of pity and grief at this sight. But the Lamb was so joyful and seemed so unperturbed by his injury that the pain of his wound was not apparent in his face. On the contrary, he seemed to be ecstatically happy! Then I looked among his shining followers, at how they were so full of life and I saw suddenly among them my own little queen, whom I had thought was still standing on the opposite bank of the river. Lord, she looked so happy amongst all her friends, dressed in such dazzling white clothes! Suddenly, I found myself wrestling with an overwhelming desire to wade across the river and be with her − for luf-longyng in gret delyt − in love and in joy!

Delyt me drof in yye and ere − In love and in joy, the sight and sound of it drove me crazy. I had to be with her, beyond that river, although she was no longer mine. Nothing could stop me, no hand could prevent me from rushing into that flood and swimming for the other side, even if it meant death! But when I plunged into the water, I was soon made aware of my foolishness. It was not to my Prince’s liking that I carried myself through that frenzied torrent, impetuous and full of vigour, and I was quickly hindered in my haste, for as I struggled through the water towards the far bank, the frantic exertion shook me out of my dream. I woke into that serene garden, my head laid upon the mound where I had lost my pearl.

I roused myself, my thoughts racing. Sighing, I said to myself: “All comes about to Christ’s satisfaction.” But I took no pleasure at all at being cast so suddenly from that beautiful region, from all the sights that had seemed so alive and pleasing. A heavy longing plunged me into a daze and I cried out: “Oh pearl of radiant wealth! What you have shown to me in this vivid dream is so precious! And if it is true that you are now placed in such a bright garland ring, then I am happy to remain in this dismal prison, knowing that you are so dear to that Prince.”

If I had submitted myself to that Prince’s pleasure and craved no more than I had been allowed, if I had behaved myself and been meek, as the pearl had urged me to be, I may, in God’s presence, have been allowed to see more of his mysteries. But a man will always try to seize more joy to himself than might justly be his and my happiness was soon snatched away again. I was expelled from that everlasting land.

To do his teaching and seek forgiveness is easy for the good Christian. Lord, they are mad who struggle against you or offer you anything to your displeasure! I have found him always a God, a Lord and an excellent friend.

On this hill I had this vision, lying in distress at having lost my pearl. But now I have entrusted it to God, with Christ’s dear blessing and mine, he who, in the form of bread and wine, the priest reveals to us every day. He gives us the chance of being his servant, a precious pearl deserving of a Prince’s love − to that Prynces paye hade I ay bente ... He gef uus to be his homly hyne · ande precious perles unto his pay.

Amen Amen