



**Modern Poetry in Translation**  
**Extract from, Series 3: No. 8**

**Jane Draycott**  
**A version of the first two sections of Pearl**

The 14th-century dream-vision known as Pearl has enjoyed a somewhat narrower readership and a great deal less attention from translators than its sister poem from the same manuscript Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (British Museum - MS Cotton Nero A. x). Widely interpreted as a devotional work of consolation on the death of an infant daughter, the poem is admired as much for the striking intricacy of its lexical and harmonic patterning as for its elegiac power, and the most recent – and very vivid – scholarly translation by Marie Borroff (W.W. Norton, 1999) skilfully re-animates that formal patterning in all its principal aspects. This version (from which the following two sections are the first of twenty) aims to move away from some of the strict regularity of the original towards a more fluid and echoing character, and is indebted to the invaluable interest and advice of Bernard O'Donoghue and to the support of Arts Council South East .

*Pearl*

One thing I know for certain: that she  
was peerless, pearl who would have added  
light to any prince's life,  
however bright with gold. None  
could touch the way she shone  
in any light, so smooth, so small –  
she was a jewel above all others.  
So pity me the day I lost her  
in this garden where she fell  
beneath the grass into the earth.  
I stand bereft, struck to the heart  
with love and loss. My spotless pearl.

I've gazed a hundred times at the place  
she left me, grieving for that gift  
which swept away all shadow, that face

which was the antidote to sorrow.  
And though this watching sears my heart  
and winds the wires of sadness tighter,  
still the song this silence sings  
to me is the sweetest I have heard –  
the countless quiet hours in which  
her pale face floats before me, mired  
in mud and soil, a perfect jewel  
spoiled, my spotless pearl.

In a place where such riches lie rotting  
what will grow is a spreading of spices,  
blossoms of blue and white and red  
which fire in the full light, facing the sun.  
Where a pearl is planted deep in the dark  
no fruit or flower could ever fade:  
all grasscorn grows from dying grain  
so new wheat can be carried home.  
From goodness other goodness grows –  
so beautiful a seed can't fail  
to fruit, or spices fail to flower  
    fed by a spotless, faultless pearl.

So I came to this very same spot  
in the green of an August garden, height  
and heart of the summer, at Lammas  
when corn is cut down with curving scythes.  
And I saw that the little hill where she fell  
was a shaded place showered with spices:  
pink gillyflower, ginger and purple gromwell  
powdered with peonies scattered like stars.  
But more than their loveliness to the eye,  
the sweetest fragrance seemed to float  
in the air there also – I knew beyond doubt  
that's where she lay, my spotless pearl.

I stood, caught in the chill grasp of grief  
in that place, clasping my hands there, seized  
by the grip on my heart of longing and loss .  
Though reason told me I should be still,  
I mourned for my poor imprisoned pearl  
with all the fury and force of a quarrel:  
the comfort of Christ called out to me  
but still I wrestled in wilful sorrow.  
The power and perfume of those flowers  
now filled my head and felled me, slipped me

into sudden sleep on the spot  
where she lay beneath me. My girl.

2

In a while my spirit left the place  
where my body slept and dreamed below  
and by the grace of God began  
its journey to a landscape of marvels.  
Who knows where in the world it was,  
but I know there were cliffs that cleaved the sky  
and facing me a forest, studded  
with stones and rocks that seemed to the eye  
to be loaded with light, of a brightness beyond  
belief, a glitter like nothing I'd ever  
encountered – no human hand ever made  
a fabric half so finely arrayed.

All the hillsides around were adorned  
with cliffs formed from crystal, clear as morning,  
which towered over trees with trunks of a blue  
that was deeper and bluer than indigo,  
trees thick with shivering foliage that slid  
and shifted like high-polished silver or ice –  
as sunlight fell through partings of cloud  
they shone and flared like shimmering foil.  
On the ground the gravel that peppered the paths  
was all precious pearls from the orient:  
even the sun seemed grey and spent  
beside such glittering adornment.

At the sight of those hills arrayed in light

the weight of grief lifted from me like air.  
A delicate fragrance of fruit drifted  
toward me, renewed me, filled me like food.  
In the forest, birds with feathers the colour  
of flame flew together – the woodland rang  
with the beating wind-rush of their wings,  
and sweet-sounding harmony of their song.  
No instrument could imitate  
the miraculous music that they made:

no one could ask for more who'd heard it,  
or seen the adornment of those birds.

That landscape's rich array and the path  
through a forest where Fortune now led the way,  
were beautiful beyond telling, far past  
my powers of human speech to describe.  
As if transported, I walked without stopping –  
no slope was too steep or hillside too high.  
The further I wandered into that wood  
the finer the fields and fruit trees seemed,  
the spices and hedgerows, meadows where streams  
ran steeply down in threads of gold,  
till I reached the curving shore of a river –  
a river of, Lord! such shining adornment.

What blazed most brightly were the banks,  
arrayed with beryl, a channel of light  
where echoing water circled and swirled,  
an eddying flood that seemed almost like words.  
The stream-bed also was bright with stones  
that glowed with the glint of sunlight through glass  
or the streaming of stars from deep in the sky  
in winter, when men of this world are asleep.  
Every pebble that lay in the lap of that pool  
was an emerald or sapphire, a storehouse of jewels,  
so the length of the river seemed lit from within  
adorned with such glitter and glistening.